1997

The art of John Olsen

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THE ART OF JOHN OLSEN

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

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FACULTY OF CREATIVE ARTS
1997

ABSTRACT

The principal aim of this thesis is to provide a major reference document on John Olsen's artistic development from the late 1940s through to 1990.

John Olsen is widely considered to be one of Australia's most significant artists, yet for many years his reputation remained based primarily on the work of the early 1960s. The aim has been, therefore, to convey a fuller picture of the scope of Olsen's oeuvre, through an examination of the gradual evolution of the work from one stage to the next over more than forty years. In addition to an analysis of the works themselves, this development is situated in the context of the time-frames and environments in which the artist was working.

The Prologue and Epilogue of the thesis examine the work I have undertaken on John Olsen's art to date in the following areas: (a) the processes employed in researching and writing the principal document of the monograph, *John Olsen*, published by Craftsman House in 1991, that was commenced while undertaking this thesis and (b) the task of bringing together a large exhibition of the life's work to date as Guest Curator of the John Olsen Retrospective, shown at the National Gallery of Victoria and the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

The thesis incorporates the essential text of the monograph as well as additional information pertaining to further academic research. As prior to my study of John Olsen no publication existed that sought to comprehend the broad spectrum of his artistic development, extensive primary research has been involved. The resulting documentation of the artist's work therefore takes the shape of a foundation study; it lays the groundwork and is a reference text that may be drawn upon for further research into specific periods and issues. Such a study is a way of establishing a basis for greater understanding of John Olsen's art over the years, thereby contributing in a significant way to art historical knowledge.

This thesis is dedicated to

GARRETT, CECILLY AND LAURIE.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis, commenced in conjunction with work that I was undertaking for a monograph on the artist John Olsen, has been assisted by many people who provided information, assistance and support.

First and foremost, my sincere thanks goes to the subject of this study, John Olsen, for giving generously of his time to undertake many hours of taped interviews, for allowing me access to a number of journals and for the confidence he placed in me. Without his support, I would not have been able to undertake this study into his art.

I am also grateful to the University of Wollongong and the Faculty of Creative Arts. This thesis has had a rather prolonged genesis. Over the years, due to a range of work-related and other pressures, it has been difficult to sustain the momentum to complete this document. In this regard, my special thanks go to my supervisor, Associate Professor Peter Shepherd, who, through his support and belief in the work involved in this project, fuelled me with the necessary determination to continue; thereby making the realisation of the final thesis possible. His patience, assistance and encouragement, as well as his friendship, are very much appreciated.

To Dr. Sue Rowley, for her time and for her guidance towards the documentation processes. My initial training at the University of Warwick, UK, was in Art History (a discipline reflected in the core component of this thesis) and while I found it difficult at times to take a more overtly personal approach, this challenged me in new ways in the writing of the Prologue and Epilogue.

Also to Lindsay Duncan for his friendship and to Sheila Hall for her assistance in typing the end material for the thesis.

I would like to thank the staff of all the State and Regional galleries, university collections and other public institutions, as well as the many private collectors, who generously provided me with access to their collections. My appreciation also goes to all those who provided information and assistance, including: Earle Backen, Dr. Jean Battersby, Diana Biernoff, Eva Breuer, Dr. Joseph Brown, Betty and Roy Churcher, Thelma Clune, Pamela Collins, Lorraine Diggins, Fred Egan, Andrew Fergusson, Christine France, Gwen Frolich, Ray Fulton, Viginia Glover, Golda Hopman, Sue Hewitt, Noela Hjorth, Henry Jolles, Jonah Jones, Matt Kelso, Robert Klippel, Michael Kluvanek, Dr. Jolly Koh and Nancy Kasprzycki, Colin

Lanceley, Elsie Liaubon, Robert Mair, Andrea May, Dr. Alan McCulloch, Frank McDonald, Mary McNish, Mirka Mora, Charles Nodrum, Esma Olsen, Katharine Olsen, Valerie Olsen, Louise Olsen, Tim Olsen and Annette Olszanski. Also to Ian Poole, Peter Powditch, Clifton Pugh, Anne and Stuart Purves (and the staff of Australian Galleries), Bill and Shahn Rose, Robert and Angela Raymond, Tom Sanders, David Selkirk and the Christensen Fund, Vincent Serventy, Christopher Shain, Peter Skryznecki, Garry Sommerfeld, Barry Stern, Veda Swain, Ken Taylor, Margaret Taylor, Ann Thomson, Daniel Thomas, Biron Valier, Sue Walker and the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, Robert Walker, Janice Ward, Greg Weight, Ray Woodbury and Lyn Williams, who gave willingly of their time and expertise.

Sincere thanks to James Mollison, former director of the National Gallery of Victoria, and to all the staff of the gallery who assisted in many ways with the realisation of the John Olsen Retrospective in Melbourne. Also to Edmund Capon and the staff of the Art Gallery of New South Wales who helped with the logistics and installation of the Olsen Retrospective at the Sydney State gallery.

To Nevill Drury from Craftsman House who gave much time and energy to the publication of the monograph on John Olsen in 1991. It has meant a great deal to me to receive supportive feedback on the monograph, both directly and indirectly, from professionals in the field including: Professor Margaret Plant, Dr. Sasha Grishin, Dr. Richard Haese, Judy Annear and Paul McGillick among others, as well as many artists. Such support has provided me with the encouragement to continue with my writing and curatorial work.

To Judy Weeks who gave me assistance with the colour images for this thesis and who has been a most supportive friend. Also to Sharon Zwi and Robyn Bondfield for their help, friendship and ongoing interest. To my brother, Graeme Hart, for his encouragement. Finally my appreciation goes to three people. To Garrett Purtill who has lived through the trials and tribulations of this thesis from the beginning with quite remarkable humour and an unstinting faith that I would 'get there in the end'. Also to my parents, Laurie and Cecilly Hart, who have given so much support that I feel as though, in a sense, they have willed this thesis into being. It is in a spirit of warmth and gratitude that I have dedicated it to them.

PROLOGUE

FINDING THE FRAMEWORK

A monograph on a living artist, no matter how well researched or considered, almost by definition is a statement of a work in progress.[1]

Undoubtedly in most intensive research projects there are moments of illumination when, from a state of feeling submerged by the weight of the accumulated material, the purpose of the task in question is brought into sharp focus, summed up, as it were, in a nutshell. Such a moment occurred to me in the course of my study of the development of John Olsen's art from his youth in the 1930s to 1990. I was well into the research towards the end of 1989 when I was invited by the National Gallery of Victoria to curate the John Olsen Retrospective. Early the following year I was called to a meeting by James Mollison, the director of the Gallery at the time, to ascertain the framework for the exhibition. During our discussions he said, 'I hope that you realise that this retrospective and your writing will be the testing ground of John Olsen's reputation. To do this you need to emphasise the strengths'. Of course these ideas had been part of my thinking but in that moment these comments crystallised the awesome responsibility of my task.

Establish the reputation and focus on the strengths in the works: these were the two key issues. This prologue amplifies the processes involved in attempting to achieve this as well as some of the questions and concerns that have been implicit in documenting the life's work to date, in ways that are intended to provide deeper insights into the whole. In brief the structure of the preliminary text is as follows:

. the background to undertaking a major study on John Olsen's art;
. the parameters of an art monograph as opposed to a biography;
. the demands of a foundation study - outlining the processes;
. working with a living artist;
. bringing the publication to fruition and
. a summary overview of the various chapters of the thesis.

The primary motivation for undertaking the project was a keen interest in and enthusiasm for John Olsen's art. It was also prompted by the fact that there was an

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[1] Sasha Grishin, *Andrew Sibley: Art on the Fringe of Being*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1993, p.6.

obvious need for a publication on his work that provided a sense of the broad evolution of his artistic development. While a regard for, and curiosity about, the work itself appears to be a self-evident point to make in relation to such a study, it is important to establish that the process was not approached from a fixed theoretical position but rather through the need for discovery and investigation that pertains to original research and documentation for a foundation study.

Prior to examining the processes and complexities involved in undertaking a foundation study of John Olsen's art it is necessary to briefly outline how this project came about in the first place.

Background

My deepening interest in the art of John Olsen occurred when I was working as an education officer at the Queensland Art Gallery. The major work in the gallery's Collection that inspired my curiosity was *Journey into the You Beaut Country No.2*, 1961. For me it appeared to be, among other things, a very robust and engaging expression of an Australian ethos. It was installed at the time in close proximity to Ian Fairweather's *Epiphany*, 1962, and Russell Drysdale's *Man feeding his dogs*, 1941, and somehow it felt appropriate located between the two - between the strong linear emphasis of Fairweather and the parched landscape of Drysdale's outback.

In Olsen's work the scrubby, conglomerate environment held together by line and parched earth tonalities reflects a feeling for place - an imagined Australia. While the zany, irrational imagery conveys an indebtedness to the CoBra group and Dubuffet, these influences are adapted and transformed into a feeling for the local context, not purely as an expression of external realities but as a fertile accretion of aspects of the artist's psyche.[2]

In the course of presenting floortalks on this work and guided tours of the Collection for a range of groups, and while conducting an intensive training program for the Queensland Art Gallery Guides, I discovered that Olsen's painting consistently provided considerable debate. Just over two decades after the work had been completed, many people still found it challenging.

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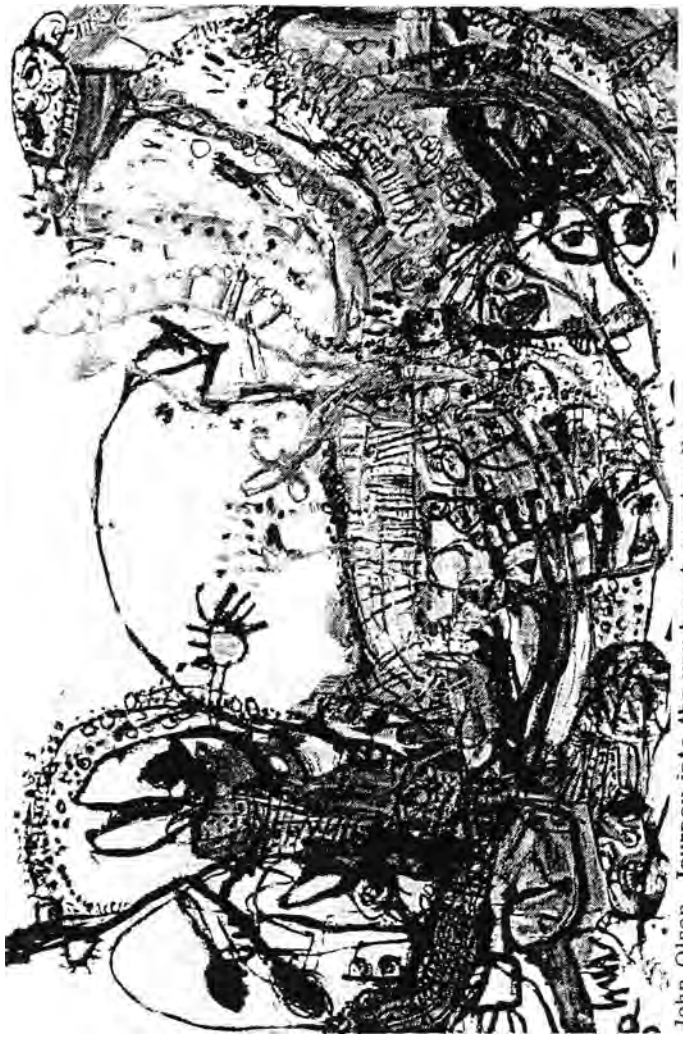
[2] As discussed in Chapter 5, since his time in Europe, Olsen was attempting to find a personal means of expressing a feeling for the Australian environment that was as much about geography as the 'character' of place and a state of mind and experience.

Queensland Art Gallery

Art work of the month



John Olsen, **Journey into the you beaut country No 2**, 1961, oil on composition board. Purchased 1961.

Journey into the you beaut country No 2 1961
by John Olsen

Presented by Ms Deborah Hart, Education Officer, Queensland Art Gallery

Wednesday 26 November 12.30pm and 5.30pm
Sunday 30 November 3.00pm

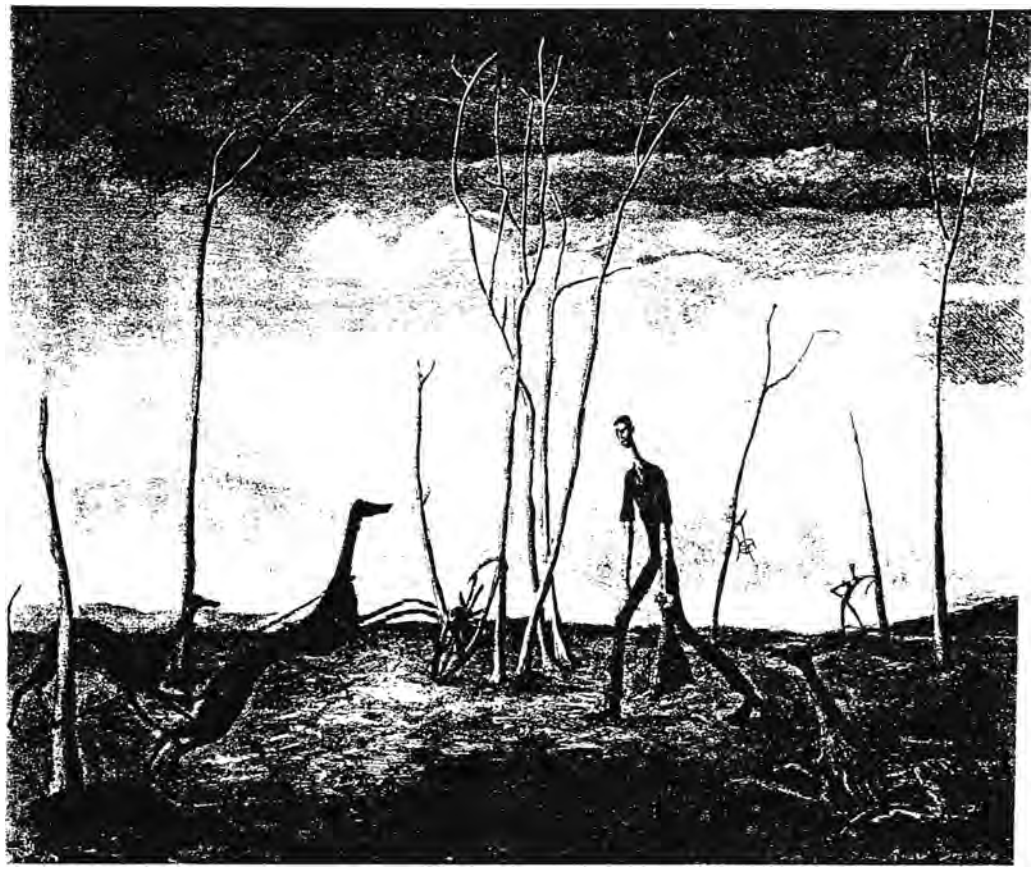
When John Olsen won the H. C. Richards Prize in 1961 for **Journey into the you beaut country No 2** it caused, in his own words, "quite a furore!" Some critics and members of the public found the wild raw energy expressed in this work difficult to comprehend. It typifies Olsen's originality and unwillingness to compromise his art.

Queensland Art Gallery
PO Box 686
South Brisbane 4101
Australia

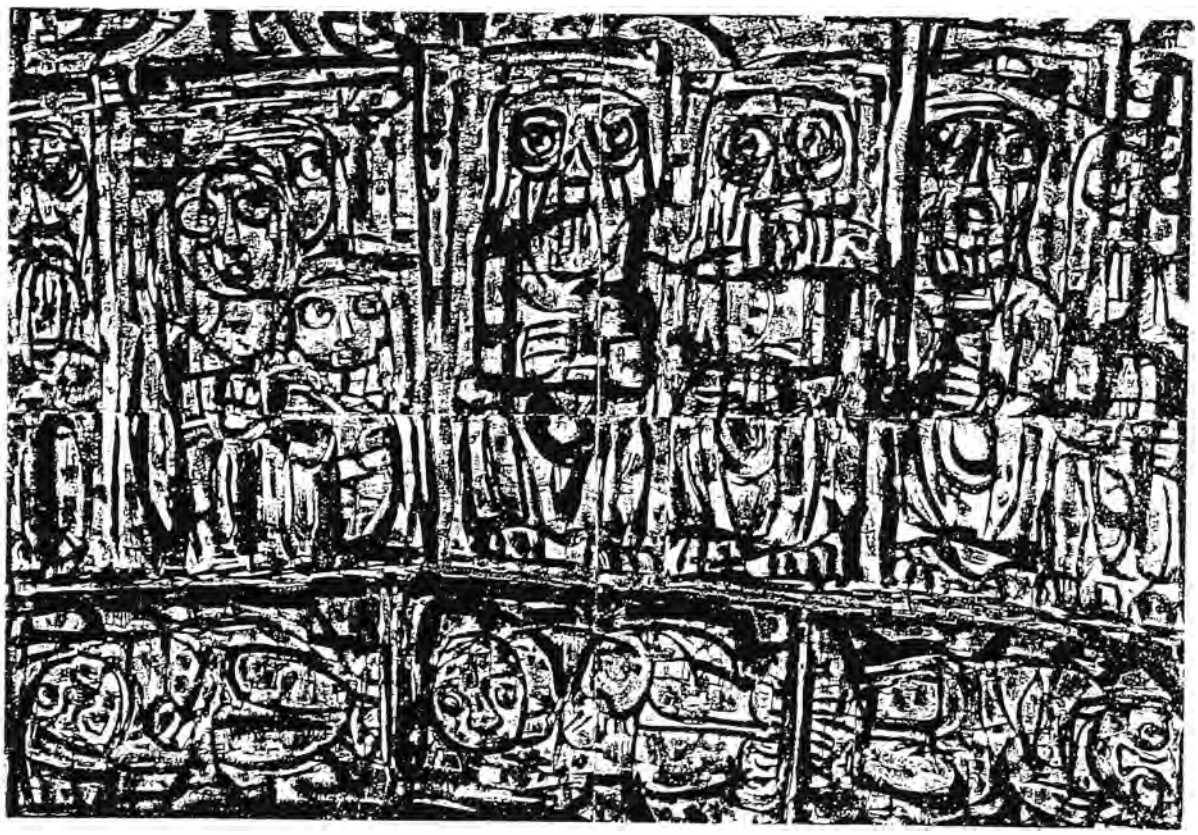
Telephone (07) 240 7333
Education Section (07) 240 7255

Gallery Hours
Monday to Sunday 10am-5pm
Wednesday 10am-8pm

Free admission
except to special exhibitions



Russell Drysdale, *Man Feeding his Dogs* 1941,
oil on canvas, 51.2 x 61.1cm. Collection: Queensland Art Gallery



Ian Fairweather, *Epiphany* 1962, synthetic polymer paint on four sheets of cardboard
laid down on composition board, 139.6 x 203.2cm. Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

As my research developed further, I began to realise that there were considerable gaps in the documentation of John Olsen's art. In 1963, when Olsen's reputation was being established, Professor Virginia Spate had written an informative and useful introduction to his work, published by Georgian House, Melbourne. However, apart from this source, catalogue and journal essays, and Olsen's own published writings about specific aspects of his work,[3] there was no substantial publication that covered the broad scope of his development - the shifts, transitions and overall evolution - over four decades.

There was an obvious need for such a book, although in the early 1980s the idea of writing a major study of this kind was inconceivable to me. I did, nevertheless, subsequently have the opportunity to interview Olsen on two separate occasions when he visited the Queensland Art Gallery for exhibitions that included his work. The first was in the form of a tape-recorded interview in 1985, at the time of an exhibition of works on paper by Olsen undertaken at Lakefield National Park, and the second was for a video *The Jack Manton Prize* that I co-produced for the Gallery in 1987, to coincide with a group exhibition of the same title. While the drawings in the former exhibition were not of major significance, the works in the latter were, in my view, very strong indeed, particularly *Broken egg and summer landscape*, 1986-87 and *Spanish black door*, 1986 (pl.121).

What struck me with regard to the paintings in the Manton Prize exhibition, as well as from my ongoing research, was that the period of the mid-1980s, was very significant in terms of Olsen's continuing artistic development. The origins of a thesis began to develop in my mind: that the strength and vitality of Olsen's output was not limited to the early 1960s - even if his critical reputation in the art history of this country had become largely relegated to this period.

For a time in 1987 I corresponded with the artist about his current work and ideas. It was through these letters that we discovered that we shared a number of common interests, particularly in relation to poetry and literature,[4] and a genuine regard for the work of artists such as Paul Klee and Giacometti.[5]

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[3] See Bibliography.

[4] I have long had a deep interest in poets such as T.S. Eliot and Gerard Manley Hopkins and had the opportunity to visit the monastery in Wales where Hopkins had lived during my studies in the U.K. Olsen's pervading interest in these and other poets is revealed in the main body of this text.

[5] My ongoing interest in 20th century art had been developed through my studies at the University of Warwick, U.K., and my Honours Thesis examined work of Paul Klee and Robert Delaunay. Klee was an important source for Olsen.

As a result of my obvious interest in the broad spectrum of his work, I was invited by Olsen, in 1987, to curate an exhibition[6] and write the introductory essay for a catalogue with the intention of bringing together a number of works on paper that he had discovered in his studio. The document, *John Olsen - Encounters with Drawing*, published by Australian Galleries in 1988,[7] went beyond the initial request for a short, introductory essay, although it was still limited in its scope.[8]

As the drawings included were primarily from the 1960s and the 1980s it did, however, provide me with the opportunity to begin to investigate the linkages and thematic concerns that informed Olsen's work across time. The main text was divided into five sections: 'Early Influences', 'The Force of Symbol', 'Flux - The Experience of Life forces', 'A State of Mind' and 'Letters to a Young Artist'. The latter was a separate section pertaining to a specific grouping of portraits of older artists that had been undertaken in the 1980s. Despite the idiosyncrasies of this grouping, the subject matter informed the connections between past and present; illuminating his sense of indebtedness to older artists including John Passmore, his most influential teacher.

In this small study the aims were to provide insights into the drawings as well as to go beyond the one dimensional public perception of Olsen as the gregarious bon vivant .[9] The text was informed by conversations with the artist and by entries in his journals of 1957 (written in Spain) and 1986 (written in Australia). From this source material it was evident that Olsen's thinking and art were informed in large part through his reading of poetry and prose, through the teaching he received in the early 1950s and through his interest in Oriental art and philosophy. This assisted me in establishing a sense of the philosophical basis underlying much of his work that was to inform my research later on.

In summary several fundamental aspects of the artist revealed themselves. In a metaphorical sense, while Spain introduced elements of the darker, shadow-side

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[6] The exhibition *John Olsen - Encounters with Drawing* was shown at Wollongong City Gallery (18 December 1987 - 27 January 1988) where I had relocated to take up the position of Assistant Director in mid-1987, and at Australian Galleries in Melbourne (3 - 25 May, 1988).

[7] Olsen and Stuart Purves from Australian Galleries agreed that this catalogue should be published in the form of a small book. It was the first in a series of similar publications that have continued to be commissioned on a range of Australian artists.

[8] Due the pressures of time - I was working full-time and writing at night - there were restraints on the amount of research I was able to undertake. However, I have found it useful in the summation of Olsen's contribution in this thesis to return to some of the thoughts that were originally expressed in *Encounters with Drawing*.

[9] While this gregarious public persona is undoubtedly part of Olsen's personality that at times informs the work, it tends to overshadow the multi-dimensional nature of the artist and the work.

through symbol and a restricted palette of browns, blacks and burnt siennas, the Sydney environment revealed a more overt ebullience and dynamism, expressed through vibrant colour. Between the two was a more contemplative philosophical dimension, informed in part through his reading and his interest in Zen Buddhism that developed in the 1950s. These concerns would be expressed from different viewpoints in the 1970s, in the course of his journeys into the wilderness areas of Australia and to Lake Eyre. Finally the group of portraits of older artists conveyed an increasing depth of human awareness, as well as a sense of his own mortality. Referred to as 'Letters to a Young Artist', they reveal Olsen's desire to share with younger artists the importance of belonging to an artistic tradition.

Largely as a result of this publication, the broader research I had undertaken to date and my professional experience at the Queensland Art Gallery and Wollongong City Gallery, I was commissioned in 1989 by Craftsman House to write an art monograph on John Olsen. This was a daunting task. Although by this time I had undertaken a reasonable amount of research, I was painfully (albeit by no means fully) aware of the considerable amount of work that lay ahead of me.

Determining the difference between a biography and an art monograph

When I began research on the Olsen monograph in earnest, my intention was to be as comprehensive as possible. However as the extent of the task I had undertaken became increasingly apparent to me, there was little doubt that clear guidelines were required. This understanding was heightened when it was brought to my attention that there had been several attempts to write a monograph on Olsen but that these had foundered.[10] It appeared that one of the reasons for this was the apprehension that the artist felt about exposure in relation to his private life. While this signalled limitations that might be imposed on my writing, these concerns made me aware of the need to clarify the intentions of my study.

One of the factors that assisted in this process was the recognition of the sheer impossibility of undertaking a full biography on Olsen at the time.[11] Although this had never been my principal aim, it did lead to a consideration of some broad definition into the question of what constitutes an art monograph as opposed to the

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[10] Discussions with Anne and Stuart Purves of Australian Galleries in Melbourne, 1988.

[11] Olsen has had a complex personal life and has married four times. Probing intimate, personal lives in published form while all parties involved are still living, and at times have conflicting memories, gives rise to questions of ethics, authorisation and libel.

discipline of biographical writing. The basic premise that guided my thinking was that whereas the biography sets out to interpret the life, the author of an art monograph sets out to interpret the work. This should not be taken as a simplistic dichotomy between the life and the art but rather as a question of the *focus* of interpretation. In defining his own aims in the authorship of a biography on Noel Counihan, Bernard Smith noted that his book 'is centred on Counihan's life, not his art'. 'There *is* a place for a considered assessment of Counihan's art but it is not made here.'[12] In the case of the John Olsen study the emphasis is centred on the art.

The question of what constitutes a biography is a complex one. However the basic principles are clear. In a fully-fledged biography the focus is firmly placed on the subject's life, psychology and personal relationships. While the subject's output, whether it be in art, literature or any other field, would certainly be an integral part of the study, the personal life generally needs to be kept in the forefront.[13] To a large extent it places the writer in an analytical, often judgemental position in determining the central protagonist's character and actions. Rebecca West has noted that any account of an ordinary person 'must be as the map of a jungle, in which there range many beasts, some benign, some abhorrent'.[14] An analysis of the complexities of relationships within the biographer's milieu are often the aspects that appear to intrigue most. In Janet Malcolm's study of the biographies written on Sylvia Plath she notes:

> When *Bitter Fame* appeared, declaring that it would 'dispel the posthumous miasma of fantasy, rumor, politics and ghoulish gossip' that was feeding Plath's 'perverse legend', it was hardly surprising that the book was not greeted with open arms...The pleasure of hearing ill of the dead is not a negligible one, but it pales before the pleasure of hearing ill of the living.[15]

In contrast to biography, an art monograph is essentially within the discipline of art history. It is of primary importance to evolve an understanding of the work itself and to establish the predominant patterns - the connections, shifts and transitions - from one stage of the artist's development to the next. An analysis of the works and

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[12] Bernard Smith, *Noel Counihan: Artist and Revolutionary*, Oxford University Press, 1993.

[13] Most authors of biographies acknowledge the crucial importance of timing in being able to publish their work. In his most recently revised biography of Lytton Strachey, author Michael Holroyd provides an engaging and courageous introduction to the complexities of documenting and interpreting the subject's personal life and the repercussions in terms of those who were implicated including members of their families and friends. See Michael Holroyd, *Lytton Strachey: The New Biography*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1994.

[14] Victoria Glendinning, *Rebecca West*, Papermac, Macmillan, London, 1988, p.2.

[15] Janet Malcolm, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath & Ted Hughes*, Picador, London, 1994, p.24. In relation to 'the living' she was referring to Ted Hughes.

their place in the artist's *oeuvre* in turn needs to be placed in the context of the times and artistic debates that may have shaped the work. These essential strands provide the basic structure. Where the monograph is also a foundation study - a primary source document - a considerable amount of 'sleuthing' is required in the initial stages to track down the works. Unless the works across the time-frame have already been discovered and documented, this is an imposing task in itself.

While the fundamental purpose of the art monograph is to provide insights into the work, I would like to reinforce the point that this does not imply a separation of art and life. What is in question here is the extent to which the biographical details, particularly relating to personal relationships, are relevant to our understanding of the artist's approach and work. The extent of the enquiry into the private life for the purposes of an art monograph defies absolute definition. For while some artists are clearly more autobiographical than others, strict rules seldom apply and in a body of work, particular paintings or drawings may well be more revelatory of aspects of the life story and the private self than others.

Although I did take it upon myself to meet with Olsen's three former wives, Mary McNish, Valerie Olsen and Noela Hjorth, and his current wife, Katharine Olsen, and while all are referred to in the text, it would take a separate biographical study to investigate these relationships more extensively. While it was not appropriate in my study to delve into the psychological maze of relationships in the context of an art monograph, I did believe that for historical accuracy it was important to mention each of them in the context of the times when they were living with John Olsen.

Furthermore in terms of the sustained relationship with Valerie Olsen over some twenty years I found that her own recollections and those of their children, Tim and Louise, did inform aspects of the text. For example, Louise Olsen's comments with regard to the experience of growing up at Watsons Bay and later watching her father paint in the countryside with Clifton Pugh, Fred Williams and Albert Tucker, provided lively insights into the atmosphere of the times in relation to the art itself. Another example of the merging of personal, biographical information and the art was also evident in the paintings that, in a sense, described the high and low points of his relationship with Noela Hjorth: *Where the bee sucks, there suck I*, 1984-86 and *El Delor No. 2*, 1987. However, this also needs to be understood in tandem with a range of other concerns.

In the broad context of Olsen's development his daily life experiences and self-reflexiveness do at times inform the work.[16] In this thesis I have attempted to strengthen some of the biographical connections, to shed further light on the ways in which certain works reflect the artist's state of mind and to clarify the instances in which an autobiographical reading increases our understanding of a number of works of the 1980s in particular.

There are, however, many other factors beyond the overtly biographical that need to be taken into account. For example, Olsen's passion for a wide range of poetry, literature and philosophy provides important insights into the work. These interests are part of the every day but in a sense they are also particular to the 'artistic life'. By this I am referring to the imaginative space that is occupied in the world of the studio that is vital to the creative process itself. It is the space where the artist's inventiveness and transformative capacities are brought to the fore.

A similar point is raised in Traudi Allen's monograph on John Perceval when she notes that 'a thoroughgoing autobiographical reading would pose unnecessary limitations'.

> The character of the oeuvre may be seen to involve self-reference but at the same time it is imbued with a diversity of interests. The work is reflective of the time when it was painted and sculpted but of broader philosophical concerns also. Perceval's is a fictional place.[17]

The place that John Olsen's art inhabits cannot be neatly defined. It is a place of shifting parameters where fact and fiction merge; where the imagination finds continual resurgence through and beyond the circumstances of the life in the works themselves.

In summation there are also practical concerns. While attention is paid to aspects of biographical interpretation and narrative, in a written text that sets out to trace the artist's development over several decades for the first time, it is impossible to do full justice to the telling of the art and the life. So that while the life is inter-woven into the evolution of the work in my study of John Olsen, it is the art that is the focus and the foundation of the study.

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[16] Other examples of works that are directly autobiographical include Olsen's portrait of his early teacher, *John Passmore*, 1987 and *Donde Voy? Self-Portraits in Moments of Doubt*, 1989.
[17] Traudi Allen, *John Perceval*, Melbourne University Press, 1992, p.3.

An art monograph: the process of establishing the life's work to date

One of the major tasks of a foundation study is to locate as many of the artist's works as possible. Due to gaps in previously published material there were periods of John Olsen's development that appeared to be voids in terms of both written and visual documentation. In order to establish a viable archival record to overcome the omissions and do justice to the overall patterns of the life's work to date, it was vital to spend time tracking down public and private collections in which the artist's works were held.

The strategy I adopted was firstly to determine these sources and subsequently to contact the various institutions and collectors to arrange appointments to view the works. I believed that it was necessary to study this primary source material as closely as possible - to really look at and develop a feeling for the work - so that when I came to the point of selecting images for reproduction and writing about them I would be able, with some assurance, to ascertain the significance of specific examples in Olsen's development.

During the course of visiting collections, I planned to photograph and progressively catalogue each work. Although this methodology was time-consuming in practice, the resulting material provided an invaluable archival resource in terms of writing and ongoing research for the monograph and thesis, and in the selection of works for the John Olsen Retrospective.

To begin with I had a number of discussions with the artist. Olsen had not kept many photographic records of his work over the years and his preoccupation was more focussed on his current creative output. There were a few paintings from earlier periods that he had retained, but these represented a tiny fraction of the whole. As I was familiar with the process of securing loans for exhibitions, the logical procedure was to write to all State and Regional galleries around Australia to ascertain their holdings of Olsen's work. A number of university and other tertiary institutions with art collections, as well as corporate collections, were also contacted. The replies to my letters provided the basis for my archive as well as a preliminary guide to the collections that I would need to visit.

The more difficult sources were the private collections and to this end I began by contacting the commercial galleries which had shown Olsen's work. From the start it was important to clearly establish the nature of my work and to ensure the gallery representatives of my respect for the confidentiality regarding private collectors.

In relation to the galleries I had been collecting John Olsen's exhibition catalogues for some time. Through this source material I was able to confirm the commercial galleries in which he had shown over the years. The most significant of these were: Macquarie Galleries in Sydney in the 1950s; Clune Galleries in Sydney and South Yarra Gallery in Melbourne in the 1960s; Rudy Komon Gallery in Sydney in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and Australian Galleries in Melbourne, first in 1963 and then in the 1970s and 1980s.[17] Olsen had a couple of noteworthy exhibitions at Tynte Gallery in Adelaide in 1984 and 1986, and had also shown work with Barry Stern Galleries in Sydney, Skinner Galleries in Perth, Greenhill Gallery in Adelaide and Perth, and the Reid Gallery and Ray Hughes Gallery in Brisbane.[18]

Undoubtedly the Macquarie Galleries played a vital role in the 1950s in Sydney and in the art world in Australia. However, as discussed in the second chapter of the thesis, this was a very different time to the present and professional standards of cataloguing and keeping records have improved dramatically. Virginia Spate's publication of 1963 included a listing of works and collections but there was the difficulty of tracing the private collectors after so much time had passed. Auction records were gradually consulted and notification of the search for works in the press assisted in alerting collectors.

Of the major exhibiting venues representing Olsen in the 1960s Clune Galleries, South Yarra Gallery and Rudy Komon Gallery were no longer operational. It was, nevertheless, possible to meet with former gallery representatives including Frank McDonald who had managed Clune Galleries in the 1960s.[19] He provided some useful information in terms of receipt books and letters, although problems arose in that the buyers of the works had often moved house or the works themselves had changed hands. (At times I even resorted to going through the Sydney telephone directory and on one occasion when I found a collector who at last understood the

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[17] Although Ian Dungavell notes in his BA Honours thesis, *John Olsen: The You Beaut Years, Paintings 1960-64*, Australian National University, 1989, that Olsen's 'close association with Australian Galleries endured even after his last show at the Clune Gallery in 1968', it should be pointed out that the artist only had one solo exhibition there in the 1960s (in 1963) and that this 'close association' only really developed from 1972 onwards. Clune Galleries was closely associated with South Yarra Gallery in the 1960s and it was at this Melbourne venue that Olsen's solo exhibitions of 1965 and 1967 were held.

[18] For a fuller list of venues which held significant solo exhibitions of John Olsen's work, including specific dates, see Selected Exhibitions in the end material of this thesis.

[19] I also contacted Thelma Clune who, together with her son Terry Clune and Frank McDonald, set up the gallery in the 1960s as a meeting place for artists. By the time of my visit to interview Thelma Clune she was already in her nineties and while she wasn't able to assist with the location of works, she provided helpful information relating to the context of the times.

nature of my request he replied, 'You've done well finding me but you will have to go to the auction records because I sold the painting some eleven years ago!').

Among the other gallery representatives I visited was Gwen Frolich who had played a vital role in assisting Rudy Komon with the running of his Sydney gallery. Once again she provided some helpful information, partly in relation to records and collectors, but also in terms of photographic documentation and her insights into Olsen's relationship with Komon in the early and late 1960s.[21]

Undoubtedly the most helpful commercial gallery in terms of resource material was Australian Galleries in Melbourne (established by Anne and Tom Purves in 1956). After her husband's death Anne Purves was joined by her son Stuart in managing the Melbourne gallery and this partnership has continued to the present day. There was documentation on their files such as reviews of Olsen's exhibitions, as well as ledgers of works exhibited and sold, often accompanied by small black and white photographs. This greatly facilitated my research and the process of locating collectors who had purchased works from the gallery. Nevertheless, the task of physically visiting collections and viewing the works remained considerable.

Due to the predominance of collections in Sydney and Melbourne, these two cities were to become my research bases. I found it interesting that despite the fact that Olsen has often been thought of as a Sydney artist, he has had a devoted following of collectors in Melbourne for many years. In both cities I found that I was often welcomed by private collectors into their homes and questioned about the specific works by Olsen that they owned. However, in general terms, I was seldom asked the current value of the works by Melbourne collectors in contrast to their northern counterparts. Instead there was a pervasive, genuine interest in the nature of the work in their collection and the place it occupied in the artist's output.

It was also necessary to go beyond the Sydney-Melbourne nexus in order to find the broad spectrum of Olsen's art and to undertake careful and thorough research into his development. To this end during late 1989 and into 1990 I travelled to major cities and some regional locations in the Australian Capital Territory, Western Australia, Queensland and South Australia. Early on in this process my role became akin to that of an amateur sleuth: seeking the pieces of the large puzzle and simultaneously endeavouring to place them, to inform them and gradually to provide

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[21] Gwen Frolich has been a tireless worker behind the scenes in the commercial gallery world, assisting dealers, patrons and artists.

a meaningful shape to the whole. There was constant overlapping and cross-referencing of information as works were sought, located and corroborated through catalogues, articles, reviews and interviews. This was not a straightforward linear methodology due to the dispersed locations of the source material. In the course of visiting public and private collections in different States it was, for example, impossible to view works in sequential order and I found that in a day I might see several works from the 1950s and others from the 1980s.

Once the obsession took hold I would sometimes travel for hours to view a single work. There was inevitable frustration when the works themselves did not appear to validate the effort but in other instances the element of surprise and discovery when coming across a significant work that filled a gap in the puzzle was very rewarding. Furthermore viewing a broad spectrum of John Olsen's art, including some quite minor works, did assist me in understanding the patterns of the whole as my research progressed. As with most artists, Olsen's work across several decades was not of a consistent standard; this variability also being inherent in the very nature of his art practice in its emphasis on process. He has been quite prolific over the years and in the transitional phases of his development, I discovered works that were experimental or simply Olsen 'drawing his think', trying to find a way to proceed.

An excerpt from a letter I wrote to the artist in October 1989 gives a feeling for the preliminary stages of the search that I was undertaking.

> I drove in to Canberra yesterday on a cool spring morning and went straight to the National Gallery where I had an appointment to view your works in the Collection. I arrived a little early which allowed me to have a quick look at the recent re-hang of the permanent collection. I am pleased to be able to report that your 'dark brown river god' [paraphrasing T.S. Eliot] *Spring in the You Beaut Country* looks very strong indeed, as does the lyrical *Dappled Country*...After being led through an underground maze to the storage area I saw the *Bicycle Boys*, 1955, which is really a rather beautiful work, much more subtle than the postcard suggests...I was surprised to discover *Salute to Cerberus* which I thought was still in the U.S.A.
>
> Today I visited Alan Boxer - a real gentleman. He has three works by you. I found *McElhone Steps* and *Childhood by the Seaport* most exciting. The former with its rich warm colour and sense of the larrikin relates to *Billy Rose and the McElhone Steps* [in another private collection]...
>
> Later on a rather frustrating hour was spent at Woden town centre trying to locate some of your tapestries...Although I had contacted them beforehand, my arrival was regarded with incomprehension and I 'progressed' from one bureaucratic blank look to another. By

> the time I found someone who knew where they were currently displayed it was too close to the public servant witching hour (5.00 p.m.) to get to see them. I shall not be deterred and the 'morrow shall find me wending my way back to the metropolis of Woden! [22]

Cross-referencing source material

Concurrent with locating works I was consistently undertaking research in the various State Gallery libraries as well as other public libraries. Due to the nature of my study I was sometimes given access to curatorial files by staff of the galleries and directly relevant primary source material was located in this way. Such a discovery occurred, for example, on a visit to the Art Gallery of Western Australia in a copy of a letter dating back to October 1956 from the director of the gallery at the time, Laurie Thomas. It was written to the young John Olsen to let him know about the agreement by the trustees of the gallery to purchase *View of the Western World No.3*, 1956, for the collection.

> I regard it as one of the best abstract paintings made in this country and it was easily the best of all the paintings I collected on this visit to other states.

This was only the second of Olsen's works to enter a State gallery collection and Thomas's enthusiastic support clearly meant a great deal to the emerging artist. Having recently looked at the work in the gallery store (and calling to mind *Dry Salvages*, 1956, in the Art Gallery of New South Wales) the immediacy of Laurie Thomas's correspondence enlivened the atmosphere of the time when Olsen and other artists were beginning to receive recognition.

The ways in which different aspects of primary research are able to amplify one another, bringing deeper understanding of a particular period, is evident in the ongoing cross-referencing of material. For example it was possible to expand the context of Olsen's formative years in the mid-1950s (opened up in the letter from Laurie Thomas and viewing the works themselves) through interviews with artists such as William Rose. Referring to a photograph of himself and Olsen with their works in 1956 Rose noted:

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[22] When I did finally track down these tapestries, I felt that they were not of primary significance for a foundation study. I was disappointed to find that they were not being very well cared for with office equipment being pushed up against some of them. I subsequently attempted to get this situation redressed.

> It was not so much defiance but "who are we?". We are certainly not the son's of our fathers...
>
> Hanne Fairfax...Mervyn Horton and James Gleeson [came along]; John and I walked out onto the balcony to let them look at our paintings...they said, 'Well, of course'. There was a truck downstairs and that was it. We were sending our works off into an unknown world, a world filled with hope, detached from the institution of Australian art. The whole idea was to produce something; bend light, bend the lot.

In his comments Bill Rose summed up the attitudes of a number of artists at the time: the sense of wanting to find a new way forward in art and life; to assert a modern sensibility and to transcend the confines of family life, of Australia in the 1950s and of literal, figurative representation in art. Similarly, Rose's recall of the morning after Olsen had completed *Spanish Encounter*, 1960, during the period when both artists were living in an apartment block in Victoria Street, Potts Point, brought the sense of the work *in the context of the times* to life in a way that no previously published account had done for me. It is, in my view, such memories of genuine, personal experience that bring a sense of veracity and real vitality to accounts of the work.

Many interviews occurred throughout the research period: with John Olsen, with family members (including his mother who has sadly subsequently passed away), with other artists, with friends, colleagues, art professionals and those who had worked on collaborative projects, including tapestry weavers and ceramicists. Probably as a result of an insufficiently disciplined interviewing technique, I attained many extraneous hours of taped material. The process of extracting material from the transcripts of these interviews was akin to the methodology of selecting images in film-makig, where much is left on the cutting room floor. Nevertheless, in the final analysis I invariably ended up with several pertinent quotes that assisted in illuminating the times and the work being produced.

A number of artists gave generously of their time in interviews including Robert Klippel, Colin Lanceley, Valerie Olsen, Virginia Glover and Clifton Pugh. One of the difficulties in relation to the 1950s and early 1960s, in particular, was that Olsen had been associated with so many artists, as a friend, fellow artist, then teacher and vital personality about the city, that it was impossible to interview them all in the time available to me. The artists I did interview had quite vivid personal recollections of Olsen's contribution, highlighting in part the great differences in Australia during this period in the art world compared with the 1980s and 1990s. This alerted me to

the danger of attempting to make judgements about the past from the present without sufficient insights into the times from those who had actually experienced them.

While the information gleaned from interviews was often enlightening, one of the more tedious aspects pertaining to the recordings was the process of transcribing them back at my home office. I did not have professional recording equipment and spent many hours with my small tape recorder playing and re-playing excerpts in order to transcribe them accurately. One particular recording remains etched in my memory. It was undertaken in Adelaide with Daniel Thomas at the Art Gallery of South Australia (he was director of the gallery at the time) and he had provided useful information about his recollections of Olsen in the 1960s. We had done the interview in the little courtyard outside the gallery and were both talking quite softly. To my dismay when I listened back to the tape I discovered that the chirping of the many small birds in the trees around us was in fierce competition with the interview and it took most of a full day to unravel the information!

Whereas information on the period of the early 1960s was plentiful both in terms of primary resource material and previous documentation, by 1965 this was no longer the case. It was by this year that Olsen had reached the peak of his popularity and as the old Australian cliché goes, one tall poppy was ready for cutting down. This was exacerbated by changes that were beginning to occur in the art world, such as the move towards hard-edge and minimal abstraction. It was also during this time that a number of Australian artists were living and exhibiting in London and while Olsen joined some of his friends there in 1965, he was floundering to find a sense of direction. In a personal sense this was alleviated when he travelled to Portugal to undertake a tapestry commission but works of this time were scarcely documented, apart from catalogue listings and some media coverage. In addition to the process of locating the works, I found that letters sent to and from Australia provided one useful way of bridging gaps in the knowledge base.

One of the lessons I learned in relation to primary research was never to leave an old box in storage unturned. Although by the time I visited Frank McDonald in Potts Point I was feeling physically unwell (partly induced through working day and night for a number of months) in the process of going through unsorted material in the open garage in a side street near the house, it was with considerable delight that I came across the correspondence between John Olsen and McDonald during the mid-1960s when the artist was based in London and Portugal. While McDonald's letters unveiled practical matters such as the requirements for tapestry commissions,

Olsen's letters were conversational, poetic and revealing about the progress he was making in his art. Take, for example, the following excerpt:

> I have just had the most beautiful day painting - a beautiful thing developing into a head attached to a spoon going into a large hungry mouth with lots of teeth...[Castelo de Vide] better than ever, all the big fundamental rhythms laid out...donkeys being shod and a big windlass firing the hearth, meat being hung in the street, the spirit of the fountain - lots of unbelievable poetry - the Castle of Life has many secrets. Every day I try to listen to her heart.

This was a pertinent instance of the cross-referencing between visual and written documentation. As soon as I read the comment about the painting with the spoon going into a hungry mouth, I was able to recall two paintings around the theme of Portuguese kitchens[23] that I had seen in private collections, enlivening the process of finding another piece of the puzzle. It was through this kind of primary source material that I was able to attain a feeling for the time that Olsen had spent abroad during these years - helping to provide necessary information on his development.

Another instance when the 'old boxes' routine came into play was in my search for a work entitled *The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower* (the title being derived from a poem by Dylan Thomas). It was referred to in the catalogue for Olsen's exhibition at Tynte Gallery in 1984. The artists could not recall a work of that title and I therefore tried to contact the gallery. However the gallery had changed hands and the current owners had no knowledge of the work.

I continued in my search. During a visit to South Australia, I again contacted the Tynte Gallery to check if there might be any material at all relating to Olsen's exhibitions there. They said there was one old box with odd bits in it that didn't seem very interesting but that I was welcome to have a look. What I finally found was a small plastic sleeve of slides from the exhibition in question, with each slide numbered according to the catalogue. To my disbelief, the relevant slide revealed a painting that I had found many months previously at the National Gallery of Victoria that had been acquired from Australian Galleries in 1986. At this later date the painting had been entitled *Where the bee sucks, there suck I*, 1984-86 (the image that was eventually selected for the cover of the monograph). Frustration at having spent time trying to find a work that I had already located was mixed with a sense of jubilation at having solved the problem. When I came to the stage of writing the final

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[23] Both paintings, *Portuguese Kitchen No.1* and *Portuguese Kitchen No.2* undertaken by Olsen in 1966 are illustrated in Chapter 6 of this document.

manuscript of the monograph, the change of titles (the first from a poem by Dylan Thomas and the second from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*) informed my analysis of the work and made sense of Olsen's comments in his 1984 journal when he had begun work on the painting.

As the previous example indicates, an aspect of cross-referencing in the research came through a range of associated disciplines including reading the source material that had inspired particular works, such as texts on philosophy and a wide range of poetry and literature. Also in the instance of Olsen's works of the 1980s pertaining to various operas (undertaken for the State Theatre complex of the Victorian Arts Centre) it was both illuminating and an enjoyable aspect of the research to seek out the librettos and to hear the music that the artist had consulted and listened to in his studio while creating the paintings.

A sense of place amplifying the story of Olsen's development

In the course of locating works around the country and gathering research material I spent some additional time visiting the places in which Olsen had lived. This was important for, as I was discovering, the environments in which the artist had worked had exerted a dramatic impact on much of his art.

I visited John Olsen's birthplace, Newcastle, where I went to the regional gallery to view works, met with Andrew Fergusson (a friend of Olsen's from his student days at Ashton's), looked at a mural in the Town Hall, visited Dawson Street where the artist had grown up, and generally absorbed the atmosphere of the place that had left its impression in works such as *Newcastle Coalboat*, 1973. These experiences also informed my understanding of Olsen as a person who had grown up during the Depression years in a place of down to earth attitudes; a place that was largely an industrial port where cultural pursuits were secondary or negligible compared with the practical demands of daily life. It provided the background to a person who, in his own mind, had discovered his vocation as an artist as a 'minor miracle'.

Another place where John Olsen had spent time that amplified my feeling for the works, was the landscape of Cottlesbridge in Victoria. Not long before he died I visited Clifton Pugh there at the property he had named 'Dunmoochin'. It was in this environment, set up as a place for creative people and a sanctuary for wildlife, that Olsen had retreated with his wife Valerie and their two children in 1969. It was here that Olsen had painted in the open with his friends Pugh, Fred Williams and Albert Tucker and where his style had undergone a significant shift from the overt

ebullience of his Sydney paintings to a generally more meditative response that was directly associated with the landscape. The straw-coloured hills and many dams around the property provided a link with paintings such as *The Chasing Bird Landscape*, 1969, that I had seen in a corporate collection, and the strange metaphorical *Two Eyes of the Dam*, 1970.

While in South Australia I also ventured out into the country, to the settlement of Clarendon about half an hour outside Adelaide. It was in his studio in this small hamlet that Olsen did some of his finest paintings, inspired in part by the countryside through the different phases of the seasons. At the time he lived with Noela Hjorth and while her studio was in the garden of their property, Olsen's was in the main street. Although Clarendon is relatively close to Adelaide it was not difficult to imagine in the course of my visit, how it would be possible for John Olsen to create a hermetic space for his work that, for the most part, felt removed from the pressures of the art world.

In the latter part of 1987 and into 1988 I had seen John Olsen quite regularly while I was curating the exhibition *John Olsen - Encounters with Drawing* and writing the accompanying small publication. As Olsen had been experiencing difficulties in his relationship with Noela Hjorth, he had moved to an apartment in the suburb of Paddington in Sydney. It was in this intimate space that he did the majority of the series of studies of older artists entitled, not altogether paradoxically, 'Letters to a Young Artist' (visual and written missives which aimed to convey a sense of indebtedness and greater awareness of the past to younger artists). It was also during this period that I was able to visit a number of sites in Sydney that had been important to Olsen in his youth and that had informed a number of his paintings relating to the Harbour and the metropolis.

By the time I had begun to research the monograph in 1989, Olsen had moved to the Blue Mountains with Katharine Howard. I visited John and Katharine, first in the Blue Mountains and then, towards the conclusion of the writing, at their property in Rydal. During this period I was able to observe works in progress in the artist's studios. These paintings and drawings revealed that, as a result of moving from one place to another, along with the problems of personal transitions and uncertainties, Olsen was focussing on narrative-inspired works and continuing to draw and paint portraits and 'portrait-landscapes' (in effect psychological environments) that are among his most introspective, thought-provoking works to date.[24]

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[24] See for example *Donde Voy? Self-portraits in Moments of Doubt*, 1989, Chapter 15.

Working with a living artist in the context of the 1980s

The friends that have it I do wrong
Whenever I remake a song
Should know what issue is at stake:
It is myself that I remake.

W.B. Yeats[25]

At this point it is appropriate to briefly reflect on the processes involved in working with a living artist and some of the difficulties in writing a monograph in the 1980s.

As previously mentioned, I had undertaken interviews with John Olsen at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1985 and 1987 and then when I was at the Wollongong City Gallery in 1988. During late 1989, after he had moved from Sydney and I had resigned my position in Wollongong to research and write the monograph, we met sporadically to discuss the progress of my work and to conduct interviews. During the course of my research around the country, I increasingly had questions to ask the artist. The responses to these ongoing queries about specific periods and works varied from being very informative, to poetic, to evasive, to re-workings of the past, depending on his own memories of the time.

In fairness it has to be said that it is not easy for many of us to remember aspects of what we were doing in the recent past, let alone some twenty years ago. However, there was the added factor of Olsen's proclivity to merge fact and fiction; a factor that informed the work itself but also provided difficulties in confirming the accuracy of historical information. As noted in the first chapter of the monograph, Olsen agreed with Oscar Wilde's premise 'that reality often needs to be improved upon; that facts are for bending'. So it was that prior to meeting his mother, Esma Olsen, and his maternal aunt, Elsie Liaubon, I had been convinced that he was of Irish ancestry. This proved not to be the case; although the fact that his maternal forebears were of Scottish origin, still preserved the link with the Celtic past that had long been an important part of his creative imagination.

Another example of fictionalising the facts occurred in published accounts of his development which recorded the first art school he attended as Julian Ashton's. However during an interview with the artist Earle Backen I discovered that Olsen

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[25]Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, Faber and Faber, London, 1969, p.189

had in fact first attended classes in the late 1940s at the Datillo Rubbo Art School. Probably because the teacher who had made the greatest impression on Olsen as a student was John Passmore and also due to successive re-tellings that referred to Ashton's, this 'version of the truth' had stuck. When I finally broached such discoveries with the artist he responded with an understandable degree of irritation at my seemingly relentless investigations.

My communication with Olsen through the time of writing was variable. There were meetings in Sydney when the interviews went really well; such as those instances when I showed him photographs of early works that surprised him and jolted his memory, bringing forth salient points about the work and the times. In addition we both greatly enjoyed sharing ideas about literature, poetry and music. Occasionally he would write to me about his current work and the positive dynamic with the artist in relation to his recent work facilitated the process of my writing.

There were, however, other occasions when Olsen felt concerned about questions pertaining to aspects of the past. I, in turn, felt that I had to retain my independence in the writing and stood firm on certain points. There were times when the artist's anxiety about how the story of his life and work would unfold heightened my own sense of vulnerability; particularly at one point around March 1990 when Stuart Purves of Australian Galleries met with me in Sydney to say that he had just visited the artist who had asked for me to stop writing![26] By this point I had resigned a full-time job and had already undertaken intensive research towards the publication. I was unwilling to withdraw, knowing within myself that the difficulties would pass. There was a time of painful silence.

Around this period my sense of isolation was compounded by the fact that in the prevailing context of academic post-modern theory and debate in the late 1980s, there were those colleagues who saw what I was doing as completely out of step with the times. Although I had long supported many emerging artists (including women) here I was doing the unthinkable, writing about 'a mainstream male' who had been in favour in the early 1960s and who had 'had his day'. Clearly the view was that, if I were to continue, I should 'deconstruct' as opposed to construct the

[26] As previously mentioned this feeling of wanting the documentation to cease had occurred in relation to earlier attempts to write a monograph. It is perhaps a natural reaction during a period of intense scrutiny of one's work over a considerable time-frame to feel a sense of trepidation.

life and times; essentially an impossibility as a foundation study of the development of the artist's work over some forty years had not yet been established.[27]

Simultaneously my own gender and age seemed to be problematic for some of the older generation. 'How odd that a younger woman [as opposed to an older male] is writing John Olsen's monograph!' One of Olsen's male colleagues went so far as to write me a patronising letter telling me that I was in deep trouble because I had allowed the artist to be too 'generous' and that I was likely to be pushed around.[28] I found these comments offensive as I did have the background of my academic training as well as my own professional standards that were important to me.

There were times when I felt like giving up but the material I had amassed in my research and the sense of being able to make some contribution to Australian art history convinced me that it was worth proceeding. Also a number of colleagues, artists and the naturalist, Vincent Serventy, encouraged me to go on. 'If you don't do it now it won't happen for a very long time. It is a difficult job but don't take an impossible position by aiming for perfection, just do it as best you can.'[29]

The question of gender is, of course, secondary to the writing of a worthwhile art historical document. However, with hindsight, I would have to say that the artist never seemed to feel that he had to put up a front with me, as he may have done with his male contemporaries. I had, for example, observed at a number of gatherings with his counterparts, how Olsen's extrovert, entertaining public persona would emerge in ways that it seldom did when I met with him on my own. It was as though he felt that he had to cover up the quieter, more meditative aspects of himself for fear of exposure or letting the side down.[30] The fact that we were able to explore internal dimensions such as poetic sensibilities as well as the doubts and anxieties that were an intrinsic part of the artist's development, I believe added a distinctive strength to my final analysis of his work as a whole.

The problems of working with a living artist in relation to vulnerabilities and demands about what should or should not be included in a particular study are by no

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[27] There was a tendency in the late 1980s among some theoreticians to overlook the fact that establishing the groundwork is a valid and necessary undertaking.

[28] Although the author ordered me not to quote him, I believe that in not acknowledging the source and in keeping direct quotations to a minimum, I am respecting his request.

[29] Vincent Serventy, conversation with the author, March 1990.

[30] While Olsen can be wonderful company through his sense of fun and good humour, in some circumstances this dimension spills over into excess in ways that may appear superficial. It was as though he continued to feel that he had to maintain his legendary persona in Sydney in the 1960s.

means unique to my experience. A number of my colleagues have said, partly in jest, 'When next you write, choose a dead artist, it's much simpler'. While in some sense this may be true, in summary I would have to say that apart from concerns about the revelation of personal details of the life, there was little interference from John Olsen. A great deal of trust was ultimately placed in my discretion to select the works and abilities to interpret them.

In relation to documenting the works of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the fact of being able to observe drawings and paintings in progress, of receiving letters from the artist relating to his life and art, and of being able to talk directly about current work, was a rather different process from the excavations relating to the past. While my research into earlier periods involved looking closely at the a wide range of works, interviewing many of Olsen's contemporaries and consulting as much previous documentation as possible (including primary sources such as letters) my participation in the context of the 1980s meant that I was able to draw more directly upon personal observations and experience.

Finally, I could not have written the current text without the many interviews I undertook with the subject. Most art historians of the present and relatively recent past would acknowledge the invaluable factor of being able to communicate directly with the artist. For while an author will obviously not take everything that is said verbatim and while sifting and analysis are inevitably required, being able to attain essential information and exchange ideas with the source of the work is naturally a significant key to deeper understanding.

Bringing the publication to fruition

After some twelve months of intensive research and documentation, including tracing and viewing works, by early in 1991 I became totally immersed in the process of writing the final text in my small home office at Heathcote in New South Wales. While the first stages of my research represented a huge gathering process, the writing called for sifting, selecting, structuring, interpreting and editing.

In a foundation study that aims to trace the development of the work for the first time, as opposed to critical discourse around previous documentation of the whole, it made sense to adopt *a clear, chronological structure*. In this way I hoped to bring to light the connections and transitions from one stage to the next. Also as part of the intention was to give a feeling for the broad range of Olsen's output over the years,

it was necessary to include works in all media: paintings, drawings, prints and ceiling commissions as well as tapestries and ceramics. This was a tall order and it was in the selection process that my photographic archive came to the fore.

I had gathered in folders literally hundreds of photographs of John Olsen's works spanning four decades and had progressively pasted these images onto A4 sheets, adding as much cataloguing data to each one as possible. As the writing began to focus on particular periods, I pinned the related photographic material around the walls of my work-room. In this way an active dialogue occurred between the visual data, cataloguing information and the other written documentation amassed during the previous months. The latter took the form of the notes I had made in the course of visiting private and public collections; transcripts of interviews with the artist himself, friends, relatives, other artists, gallery professionals and those who collaborated on his tapestries and ceramics; newspaper articles and reviews; copies of relevant information from previously published sources and some of the artist's journals. The sifting process was considerable.

A pivotal moment in the writing, referred to at the start of this Prologue, was a meeting with James Mollison in which he had noted that it was my task to establish the current standing and reputation of the artist and to emphasise the strengths in relation to the works. In addition, a key factor that informed the writing and re-writing of the drafts of my text as well as the selection of images, was to retain a sense of balance.

This was not always simply a matter of selecting what I considered to be the most significant works that I had seen, but also to focus on the major works that *best represented the times*. There were difficulties, for example, when choosing works from the 1960s and 1980s, as I had seen many more works of significance than I could possibly use.[31] It was therefore crucial to be selective and to accept that there was further scope for studies into particular aspects of Olsen's work in the future.[32]

Clearly the scope of the task at hand was quite different to a study of a relatively brief, circumscribed period and there was a real danger of becoming bogged down in a particular area of interest. To avoid this, it was vital to continually remind

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[31] This sometimes caused consternation on the part of collectors who contacted me to know why their work hadn't been selected. I had to explain that the choices were often due to logistical considerations in the spectrum of the whole study, rather than the quality of their specific work.

[32] For example, between 1980 and 1987 when Olsen undertook a number of major commissions, as well as a considerable number of other significant works, it was not possible to include an analysis of them all and choices needed to be made for reasons of space and the flow of the text.

myself of the need to keep the momentum across the entire development of the work.[33] Simultaneously I was conscious of the need to retain the microcosm and the macrocosm - or to put it another way, of *maintaining a sense of the whole without losing depth and scholarship in relation to the parts.*

One of the devices that I adopted in determining the framework for my writing was to consider the ways in which the works often underwent distinctive shifts or took on particular qualities according to the places in which the artist had lived, worked and travelled. These geographical locations not only informed the content of the works themselves but also shaped aspects of Olsen's development and unveiled the extent of interaction between himself and other artists and his involvement in the context of the times. The move by the artist from one place to another also assisted in determining the parameters of the various chapters.

Beyond such linking factors there were many logistical considerations. In the chapters on the 1950s and 1960s, in particular, the aim to include the artistic debates of the times involved distilling the considerable research material I had accumulated and placing it in relation to an analysis of Olsen's input and work. For example, the debates around the importance of the 'Direction One' exhibition in the 1950s, and the issues surrounding the 'Antipodean Manifesto', with the ensuing debates about abstraction and figuration into the 1960s, needed to be entered into, in order to make sense of the place of Olsen's work at the time it was being created.

Other problems posed themselves in relation to the breadth of material, particularly pertaining to the early 1960s in Sydney and the first seven years of the 1980s when Olsen was living in Clarendon. In these instances the multiplicity of concerns required a layered approach resulting in the chapters being divided into sub-sections. In the period from 1960 to 1964, for example, it was necessary for logistical reasons to provide a discreet, related section for the ceiling commissions and tapestry design. A similar approach was adopted in the chapter relating to the period from 1980 to 1987 - a very prolific time when Olsen created some of his most successful works. The period included works relating to: a journey to the North-West of Western Australia; a commission for the State Theatre complex of the Victorian Arts Centre; designs for tapestries; the Clarendon environment and a visit the artist had made to Spain. While on the one hand each component demonstrates distinct concerns and sources of inspiration, the majority of significant works were

[33] While one of the primary motivations was a sense of balance across the whole, the other factors that needed to be kept in mind were the parameters set by the publisher in relation to budget.

completed in Olsen's studio in Clarendon and need to be regarded as part of this particular time-frame in his life.

In summary within the chronological approach it was necessary to be constantly mindful of a range of concerns including the analysis of specific works and sources; the relationships, transitions and breakthroughs from one period to the next as the works evolved, and the context in which specific works were being created taking into account the artistic debates and the critical reception of the work. Also vital were the connections with poetry and literature in Olsen's art that impacted on particular works and revealed recurring patterns across time.

The task of attempting a coherent, fluent text provided some real challenges. However, as the writing progressed I managed to establish a framework and during the periods I was able to spend in my office in Sydney, I entered into a disciplined program of writing. As the work developed, I often found myself immersed in the writing well into the early hours of the morning. It was a rewarding process to find the long, formative period of research paying off as the many pieces of the whole came together in ways that began to make sense of Olsen's contribution.

In accordance with the aims of a foundation study I wanted to ensure that along with a readable and scholarly text, the end material of the document would provide a valuable resource for further study. With this in mind, I paid particular attention to the footnotes, catalogue of works and bibliography (including a decade by decade listing of reviews and articles that I had come across in the course of my research).

From late 1990 through to September 1991 the pressure was really on. Along with the writing I was simultaneously working on the many practical issues surrounding the John Olsen Retrospective that was scheduled for late September 1991. In the course of meetings relating to the retrospective, it had been decided by James Mollison that the book should also serve as the catalogue for the exhibition (along with small brochures) and to this end it was agreed that the publication would come out in a special soft-cover edition for the exhibition. It was therefore crucial that the publication be ready in time for the opening.

Among the practical tasks was the organisation of the many transparencies and black and white photographs to accompany the text. In the case of public collections such as those held by State galleries I liaised with staff looking after the rights and permissions to reproduce works from their collections as well as with the photography departments. With regard to the many instances of works in private

collections I was in contact with a number of freelance photographers in various cities around Australia, discussing the requirements for the publication and coordinating appointments with the owners of Olsen's works. Due to the high costs of attaining colour transparencies[34] and the impositions on collectors, it was important to work with photographers who were respected in their field, efficient and discreet. Obviously their professionalism was also vital for the quality of the reproductions in a document that set out to reveal the development of the work.

The question of the relationship between the text and the images was very important to me. I felt that due to the extensive length of the text and the need to convey the shifts and dynamics from one stage to another, it was necessary to integrate the images within the body of the text. While in a shorter study it is possible to have the colour plates at the conclusion of the written documentation, in this instance it was obvious to me that it would be a great distraction for the reader to continually be flipping backwards and forwards in an effort to marry the references in the text with the images. To this end I worked very closely with the designer, Deborah Brash, to create a balance and flow inter-relating information, analysis and literary references with the art works themselves.

I had worked with the same designer in the past and during the final stages of the Olsen project we had many demanding but ultimately fruitful sessions at her studio in Rushcutters Bay, debating such issues as the scale of the colour images in relation to their importance in the artist's *oeuvre* and how to incorporate black and white photographs, including documentary records of people and places. Deborah Brash was very committed to the project and worked long hours applying her own creativity as a designer and accommodating requests and input from myself. As we were at the outer limits of the amount of photographic material that the publisher could cope with, the decision was made by Nevill Drury of Craftsman House that it would not be possible to include comparative images of the works of Olsen's contemporaries.[35] We were nevertheless fortunate to have the scope that was already there in terms of the images to illustrate and amplify the text. Another important contributor to the publication in the final stages was the editor, Helen Bongiorno. Her professionalism as a copy editor and attention to detail was of great assistance.

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[34] These costs were borne by the artist.

[35] A small number of comparative images are included in this thesis, particularly in relation to the early stages of Olsen's development into the 1960s, amplifying the context of the work and times.

Before handing the completed manuscript to the publisher, it was necessary to consult with the artist on the final outcome. After initial meetings about the drafts, John Olsen had decided that he did not want to see each section as it emerged but would rather read the finished text. This was both liberating in terms of not having too much interference in the final stages but also became quite daunting as I planned my visit to him at Chapel House Farm, Rydal, while still desperately trying to complete the concluding details of the manuscript, with little leeway in terms of the deadline to get the document out in time for the retrospective.

When the day for the trip to Rydal arrived I missed my first train to Central railway station in Sydney due to the fact that it was a public holiday. It was not an auspicious start. By the time the next train arrived I discovered that the connection to the Blue Mountains had also been missed and I had another long wait. I finally arrived at Rydal station some five hours late. It was also July and a particularly cold winter in Rydal. As I caught a taxi to Chapel House Farm in sleeting conditions I felt tired and anxious; in trepidation that the work I had put into this project over the past two years was at stake. Not long after my arrival I sat in the living room with a stiff Scotch whisky, as Olsen began to read aloud from the manuscript. It was too much for me! The one drink seemed to go straight to my head and I had to retreat to my room where I staggered to bed and fell asleep with my clothes on.

The following morning was more settled. As the previous night's experience had alerted me to the fact that it would be too painful to be present as John Olsen read each section, I asked him if he would mind reading the manuscript in the studio, noting on the document any queries or corrections he might have for discussion. This he agreed to do. On finishing the text he called me into the studio. 'You have made sense of my work in breadth and depth for the first time. Thank you.' I was immensely relieved and only hoped that my work would be considered worthwhile in the broader context.

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The publishers, Craftsman House, under the direction of Nevill Drury, worked hard to ensure that the book was available in time for the John Olsen Retrospective when it opened in October 1991. The first published copies were in softcover and sold out within the first two weeks. There was also a much larger print-run in the hardcover edition[36] and a special limited edition that included an artist's print. While the

[36] Five thousand copies.

softcover edition was reasonably affordable, there was a difficulty in relation to the hardcover, due to the costs involved.[37] Nevertheless the work was in high demand and at the present time of writing is sold out and the publishers have decided to print a second edition.

In 1991 the monograph was short-listed for the Douglas Stewart Prize for Non-Fiction, New South Wales Literary Awards,[38] and also received an Australian Book Design Award in the same year.[39]

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[37] The softcover retailed at $45.00 while the hardcover was $90.00. Although both John Olsen and myself would have liked more softcover copies to have been available the publishers decided that this was not economically viable.

[38] In an award that is solely based on literary merit, this was apparently the first time an art monograph had been short-listed. The prize was awarded to David Marr for his biography *Patrick White: A Life*, Random Century Australia, 1991.

[39] This award, received by Deborah Brash, was sponsored by Griffin Press for the best designed book in 1991 priced at $50.00 or above.

Summations

In order to attain an overview of this foundation study on John Olsen's artistic development, the information below provides a synopsis of the various chapters in the main text.

Each chapter commences with a quote that signals predominant ideas emerging from the period of John Olsen's art under discussion. Considerable thought went into the process of selecting this introductory material in order to directly key the reader into the particular stage of the development within the evolving dynamics of the whole.

Chapter One: Origins

The first chapter provides information pertaining to John Olsen's family background, his cultural isolation, his schooling and his early interest in drawing. It conveys insights into the first art classes he attended after leaving school, at Datillo Rubbo's, and his formative interest in literature and philosophy. This is placed in the context of the 1940s and 1950s, in relation to attitudes towards art and 'artistic bohemia', the intellectual and larrikin milieu of places like the Lincoln Inn coffee shop, Olsen's contact with artists such as Earle Backen and Fred Egan, and the significance at the time of the books he discovered at Carl Plate's Notanda Galleries, in relation to his continuing interest in a wide range of poetry and literature. Also included are a couple of his earliest surviving paintings - *Lane Cove*, c.1943 and *Head of an old man*, 1950.

Chapter 2: Training and Breaking Free 1950 - 1956

The two major strands shaping the structure of this chapter are: i) the importance for John Olsen of the Julian Ashton Art School and John Passmore's teaching in particular and ii) his subsequent desire to move beyond his formative training and to evolve a more personal means of expression. These principal tenets are set within the context of the 1950s: the prevailing mood of conservatism in the Menzies era, the nineteenth century teaching methods practiced at Ashton's prior to John Passmore's arrival, the rearguard attitudes of the trustees at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and Olsen's interaction with other artists, including Robert Klippel who had recently returned from Europe. These concerns are also located in the framework of a gradually developing awareness by young artists of 'the modern movement,' heightened by the arrival of the 'French Painting Today' exhibition

shown at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1953 (the direct impact of this show being discussed in the following chapter).

With regard to the tuition Olsen received during the early 1950s, while teachers such as Godfrey Miller and Desiderius Orban are discussed, it was undoubtedly John Passmore who exerted the greatest impact on Olsen. Of particular relevance were the drawing classes and both the notion of drawing as a process of exploration and that 'it is not what you see but what you know' had an enduring resonance for Olsen. Attention is paid both to Passmore's teaching methods as well as to the underlying psychological intensity and complexities of their relationship. This provides the background to Olsen's desire, by the mid-1950s, to 'break free' and assert his own position. By mid-1955, while the works are still quite eclectic, we find in the *Bicycle Boys* series the first real indications of what were to become some of the hallmarks of his distinctive style: a strong linear emphasis and a quirky, irrational and emotive sensibility. In the course of 1955 Olsen moved to Melbourne where he made contact with a number of local artists including Lawrence Daws, Donald Laycock, Ian Sime and Clifton Pugh. In August 1956 he returned to Sydney.

Chapter 3: The Pacific Loan Exhibition and Direction One

During 1956 John Olsen moved towards a more abstract conception in art. He did not want to abandon figuration entirely but instead hoped, in Paul Klee's words, 'to make the invisible visible'. His work in this chapter is seen in the context of the 'French Painting Today' exhibition shown three years earlier in Sydney (not uncharacteristically the lessons he had learned took several years to germinate) and is also related to the discussions Olsen was engaging in with other artists, including Bill Rose, Robert Klippel and John Passmore.

In his broadly geometric, grid-like paintings the influence of the School of Paris and Vieira da Silva, in particular, provide a logical progression from Passmore's emphasis on construction in painting. However this was very much a transitional phase of Olsen's development and many of the ideas and sources of inspiration that emerged during this period, would only be realised in the work several years later. The most important of these are: an interest in Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* and in T.S Eliot's notion of 'I am in the landscape and the landscape is in me'; his desire to 'attain a mystical throbbing throughout nature' and his aim to move beyond literal representation to attain a 'new kind of figuration'.

'The Pacific Loan Exhibition' of contemporary Australian art, 1956, is shown to be a logical precursor to the 'Direction One' exhibition held in the same year. Several key points are made in relation to critical debate and the inter-relationships between artists at the time. While there were obvious links between Olsen's works and young Melbourne painters, the latter revealed a stronger interest in the Italian Futurists. Also discussed is the misconception that works by Olsen and his friends in both exhibitions were abstract expressionist. (Only John Passmore's work in 'Direction One' finds parallels with abstract expressionism.) Instead the broadly cohesive aspects of 'Direction One' were: a strong *structural emphasis*, a new international awareness and a desire to attain a metaphysical dimension in their art. At the end of 1956 Olsen departed for Europe.

Chapter 4 : Early Travels Abroad 1957 - 1960

As with the previous chapter this period continued to be a transitional phase of John Olsen's development in which he was amassing ideas about art and deepening his philosophical understandings through reading. It is a period in which his journal reveals a keen interest in Buddhist philosophy. Another important source was the writing of philosopher Henri Bergson.

In relation to place itself, while England and France were important in Olsen's development, Spain and the experience of living in Ibiza and Deya were to exert a profound impact, not only on his art, but on his attitudes to a 'way of life' in the future. In Europe, Olsen was generally disappointed with the work of the School of Paris artists and found the approach of the abstract expressionists, whose work was becoming known in Paris at the time, 'too formless'. In France he was stimulated by Dubuffet and the CoBra group whose works provide a pertinent link with Olsen's developing interest in irrational imagery, that had begun with the *Bicycle Boys* series, and would continue in his work of the following decade.

In terms of the evolution of Olsen's art between 1957 and 1960 we find him moving towards his dream of a 'new figuration' implying that a work could be figurative without resorting to literal representation. Of vital importance were the classes he attended at 'Atelier 17' in Paris where the teaching methods of S.W. Hayter encouraged experimentation and an evolutionary, metamorphic approach to process. What comes out of this experience in Olsen's work is a move towards a more organic approach and an intensifying interest in the dynamics of line, reflecting a significant shift from the geometric structures of the paintings of 1956. By 1959 with works like *Granada* we find several keys to John Olsen's later development: a

sense of flux - of all things being in constant movement, an empathy with nature and the idea that painting can express 'an emotional colouration of place'.

Chapter 5: Resolution in 'The Siren City of the Rat-Race' 1960 - 1965

The early 1960s represents a breakthrough in John Olsen's artistic development. Many of the facets that had been emerging in his art during the past decade since his training through to his time abroad, coalesced on his return to Australia. It was now that his interest in process, in spontaneity, in signs, symbols and imagery, in Paul Klee's dictum 'of taking line for a walk', in Bergson's notion of simultaneity, in poetry and literature, in his empathetic response to the natural world and in finding a means of expression to convey his response to place as a 'totality of experience', came through with conviction in his work.

From the perspective of the 1980s and 1990s it is perhaps difficult to understand how revolutionary Olsen's art appeared during the 1960s but many artists who were living in Sydney at the time have attested to the impact made when the works were first shown. Among the landmarks in Australian painting is *Spanish Encounter*, 1960, that elicited a passionate response from artists such as Tony Tuckson, and was acquired by the Art Gallery of New South Wales the year in which it was painted. Younger artists such as Colin Lanceley recall that his paintings such as *People who Live in Victoria Street* and *McElhone Steps* conveyed a feeling for the life of the street and a dynamism that was like a breath of fresh air in the Australian art world at the time, impacting, for example, on the work of the Annandale Imitation Realists. In the broader context, Olsen's art, ideas and teaching in this chapter are placed in relation to 'figurative-abstract' debates that had in part been engendered by the Antipodean Manifesto of 1959 and flowed through to the early 1960s and the '9 Sydney' exhibition.

This was also a time in which John Olsen received much critical acclaim and press coverage, won prizes and had a book written about him by Virginia Spate in 1963 (published by Georgian House). It has been intimated that this recognition which coincided with an 'art boom' in Australia meant that Olsen, whose work was largely a summation of influences, was simply riding the crest of a wave of promotion and success.[40] However, it is my view that these factors do not of themselves create good or mediocre art. In the end the work itself has to stand on its own - having something interesting to convey and encompassing the means to express it.

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[40] See Dungavell, op.cit.

I believe, as discussed in this chapter, that Olsen's most significant works such as the *You Beaut Country* series and the Harbour and city paintings, while building to some extent on a tradition, demonstrated that he had been able to transform the lessons of the past (both in relation to Australian art and his previous experience) to convey passionate and original ways of seeing and thinking about the local context.

Chapter 6: London and Portugal 1965 - 1967

By 1965 the adulation that Olsen had been receiving came to an end. This chapter looks primarily at the time that he spent in London and Portugal. Although a number of his artist friends, including Lanceley and the young Brett Whiteley, were living in London and doing quite well, Olsen never really felt at home in this city and produced very little significant art there. In considering the wider context, Olsen's work has little in common with Pop art or the abstract art (hard-edge and minimalist painting) receiving much critical recognition at the time. Instead the greatest source of inspiration (and comfort) to him was the Bonnard Retrospective at the Royal Academy in 1965.

The connections with Bonnard can be detected in works Olsen subsequently undertook relating to domestic environments, such as his paintings of Portuguese kitchens, although his imagery tends to convey a more surreal, psychic awareness. What also emerged in the paintings and brush drawings that he did in Portugal was that John Olsen was (and still is) in many ways a *regional artist* - drawing upon specific locations to evolve a feeling for place.

Olsen had gone to Portugal to work on tapestry designs with the weavers at the Portalegre Tapestry workshop and the resulting tapestries, together with the earlier tapestry *Joie de Vivre*, 1965 (also woven at this workshop) represent the first of many future collaborative works.

On his return to Sydney Olsen established the Bakery Art School and although this was a successful undertaking, the time he spent teaching and socialising dispersed his energies, and his own work suffered. By the end of the year he recognised the need for a break from the metropolis and moved with his family to Clifton Pugh's property of Dunmoochin in the Victorian countryside.

Chapter 7: Close Encounters with the Landscape - 'Dunmoochin' 1969-1971

The work of the period between 1969 and 1971 when John Olsen was living and working at 'Dunmoochin' reveals significant shifts in his artistic development. Apart from a few isolated incidents in the past, this was the first time Olsen immersed himself in painting out of doors in the open Australian landscape. This sometimes occurred in the company of other artists including Clifton Pugh, Fred Williams and Albert Tucker. The most marked transitions are apparent in works such as *Pied Beauty*, 1969, and *The Chasing Bird Landscape*, 1969, where the mood is quieter and more meditative than much of his earlier work. While spatial considerations had been important in the past, line and form tended to be worked across the surface. Now open space assumed greater significance - both visually and conceptually - corresponding with Olsen's interest in Oriental art and foreshadowing some of the works undertaken at Lake Eyre.

In this chapter critical responses to the works are discussed and consideration is given to some similarities and differences between the works of Olsen, Williams and Pugh (placed in the artistic context of the times and the widespread move towards abstraction). Also considered are the collaborative works that Olsen undertook during this period with ceramicists and tapestry weavers.

Chapter 8: 'Salute to Five Bells': The Sydney Opera House Mural

In this chapter the discussion focuses on the commission that Olsen undertook to paint an immense mural for the Sydney Opera House, *Salute to Five Bells*; a project which he worked on between 1971 and 1973. In addition to placing this work in the context of the development of the Opera House itself, the text examines the nature of the site for the mural and the evolution of this large undertaking from the initial ideas, to the various phases of the process in the Rocks studio, to the final stages when the work was placed in situ.

The mural was a daunting task and towards the end of the chapter insights are provided into the vulnerability and extreme anxiety that John Olsen experienced as he was faced with problems of raking light that seemed to diminish the work when it was placed in its location and with heckling workmen who were clearly affronted by contemporary art.

In terms of John Olsen's artistic development at that time, *Salute to Five Bells* provides a bridge between past and future. Connections with the past are apparent in

the subject matter reflecting his longheld affection for Sydney Harbour, so vividly expressed in the 1960s and given new life here. Also part of a continuum was his affection for poetry and Kenneth Slessor's poem, *Five Bells*. In the expansive open spaces of his recreated Harbour, inhabited by abbreviated signs and symbols, Olsen effectively conveyed the essential mood of Slessor's poem that is an elegy to Joe Lynch who drowned in these waters. In relation to the transitions that had occurred during the previous two years in Victoria, this work provides a logical continuation of the more contemplative approach he had begun to adopt. In his preoccupation with the natural world and ongoing interest in spatial qualities pertaining to Oriental art and philosophy, it signals future preoccupations.

Chapter 9: Discovering Wild Australia

As signalled at the commencement of the chapter, John Olsen's work during the 1970s was largely shaped by the journeys he made to a range of locations around Australia. During the course of the 'Wild Australia' film series produced for the Australian Broadcasting Commission, Olsen was invited by Ken Taylor, director of the series, to document the fauna, particularly the bird life, in their natural habitats. The transitions that occurred in Olsen's work can be seen in his intimate observation of creatures of the wild. Whereas in his earlier work the creatures that had inhabited his paintings were largely those of the imagination, he was now faced with the direct experience of reality. There are some significant linking factors with the past. For example, he was presented with seemingly endless possibilities for drawing with a brush, and he discovered the ecological confirmation of his earlier premise that all living creatures are inter-connected in a constant state of flux. Also through the use of the camera and the microscope he found that the idea of 'a totality' - uniting near and far, the macrocosm and microcosm - was made vital in the process of working.

This was a time of experimentation and there are some difficulties in this period in relation to Olsen's artistic reputation. There were no major works comparable with those of the 1960s. While on the one hand his drawings, etchings and lithographs of creatures such as birds and frogs (that continued through the decade) did develop his facility in drawing and were popular with the public, they were of variable quality and there were rather too many of them. Nevertheless this phase of his development did provide respite from the immense project of the Sydney Opera House mural. Furthermore the best of the works on paper such as *Tree Frog*, 1973 (that concludes the chapter) are quite magical in the brevity and essential energy of line, expressing a direct connection with his interest in haiku and Chinese calligraphy.

Chapter 10: Lake Eyre - The Edge of the Void

The primary focus of this chapter is the story of Olsen's experience of Lake Eyre and the effects this had on his work between 1974 and 1980. Towards the end of 1974 the lake had flooded for only the second time since white settlement in Australia and what had once been considered the 'Dead Heart' now abounded with plants and wildlife. Olsen's journeys with the well-known naturalist, Vincent Serventy, are located in the context of the past history of the lake, and the transitions that occurred from one visit to the next, as they observed the transition from the full lake teeming with life back into the dry salty desert. For the artist Lake Eyre was important on multiple levels, conceptually and visually. He found it a place of contradictions - of fullness and emptiness, life and death. Of vital importance to the art of this period are Olsen's ideas about the void and the edge. The void referred to the vast expanse of the 'lake' and also found its association with Sung Dynasty painting and the importance of space. The edge was the place where water and land came together - the meeting place of life forms and by extension of activity and imagery relating to life burgeoning and dying away.

In the broad scope of Olsen's development the experience of Lake Eyre resulted in an uneven body of work. However, examining the whole does reveal a number of important oil paintings; with works like *Lake Eyre*, 1975, and *The Simpson Desert Approaching the Void*, 1976, conveying the oscillation between contemplative, open space and dynamic linear energy. While the prints and watercolours are of variable quality, in some instances such as *Goyder Channel*, 1975, the sensitivity to line traversing the white space of the paper reveals a new dimension in the work. Furthermore, although critical opinion is divided, [41] I believe that the best of these works on paper, such as *Owls over a Drying River*, 1980, and *The Rookery*, 1978, are among the most beautiful watercolours produced in this country.

Chapter 11: The Clarendon Years

The first seven years of the 1980s were very significant in John Olsen's artistic development revealing a resurgence in his confidence in oil painting, comparable in strength to the works of the 1960s. Due to the diverse and prolific nature of the work during this period, the chapter has been divided into sections: 'A New People in an Antique Continent', 'Aix-en-Clarendon', 'Olsen and Opera' and 'Memories of Spain Revisited'. This was a complex, multi-layered phase of Olsen's work. In the

[41] See reviews of the John Olsen Retrospective in the Epilogue.

wider context, Olsen's art did not follow fashionable trends and was often excluded from survey exhibitions of contemporary Australian art.

The first part of the chapter includes discussion of the works leading up to the Clarendon phase that were undertaken at Wagga Wagga, notable for their quiet, poetic mood in relation to the landscape. Also discussed are his works relating to the South Australian landscape and the journey that he undertook to the North-West of Western Australia in the company of Geoffrey Dutton, Dame Mary Durack, Vincent Serventy and Alex Bortignon. The works that came out of this journey are generally tougher and more expansive than the Lake Eyre oils, suggesting the harshness and immensity of the landscape. Yet some of the most successful works from this time are quite delicate watercolours of wildlife and drawings of Aboriginal people.

Among the most significant accomplishments in the oil paintings of this period are those discussed in the section 'Aix-en-Clarendon', referring specifically to the Clarendon environment - to the domestic arena of love and life, to the seasons (spring, summer and autumn) and to the shifting moods and atmosphere of the local environment. Inter-woven with these themes we again find strong underlying currents of poetry and literature as sources of inspiration.

It was in his studio at Clarendon that Olsen undertook a commission to paint a series of works relating to operas for the State Theatre of the Victorian Arts Centre. In these paintings he drew upon the stories of a number of operas, distilling the essential mood of each one. As in the past, it is the metaphorical associations that makes the individual works intriguing.

The sense of vitality that informs the period is also highlighted in tapestries undertaken in conjunction with the Victorian Tapestry workshop; with the weavers providing a successful transference of Olsen's fluid line and interpretation of fecund, burgeoning life forces within the tapestry medium.

Finally this chapter examines the works that emerged from a return visit to Spain that reveal an emotional, intellectual and technical range, making them among Olsen's most outstanding works to date. They convey the daring of earlier works related to Spain but now enriched by experience. Literature is an important key, with Olsen finding inspiration in the writings of Lorca, Samuel Beckett and W.B. Yeats. These sources provide a pertinent connection with the following two chapters which reveal the artist at his most introspective.

Chapter 12: Portraits of Other Artists

This chapter deals with an idiosyncratic grouping of portraits of older artists that John Olsen worked on at intervals during 1986 and 1987. These drawings, which often incorporate written text, confirm a further stage in the evolution and maturation of Olsen's work in the 1980s. They are among his most autobiographical works, reflecting an indebtedness to the idea of belonging to an artistic tradition as well as a deepening awareness of his own mortality. In the course of writing it became apparent to me that Olsen's interests and passions have not been restricted to place but also relate to a state of mind - to the human psyche, and at times the joyous and the abrasive co-exist. Light and dark, life and death - these dichotomies inform the work in varying degrees of intensity. In the scope of Olsen's career these portraits reveal a thoughtfulness and, at times, a great capacity to attain not only a physical likeness but also psychological and spiritual insights. They are in part about human vulnerabilities; with the poetry of Yeats informing Olsen's thinking about old age.

Chapter 13: The Circus Animals' Desertion

The poetry of Yeats introduces this section with the poem *The Circus Animals' Desertion*. This chapter finds Olsen moving to the Blue Mountains and then to the countryside of Rydal. It commences with a 'portrait-landscape' *Donde Vas? (Where are you going?)*, 1989, recalling the open space of earlier works. Most introspective of all perhaps is *Donde Voy? Self-portraits in Moments of Doubt?*, 1989. It is a dark, brooding self-portrait in which complex layers of imagery inhabit a mental landscape of doubt. This is a pivotal work of the period.

During 1989 Olsen explored a range of thematic concerns; although in my view the main signposts of his development are those that reveal a further extension of his interest in the human condition. Key works are those relating to narrative such as *Jean de Florette* and *Don Quixote Enters the Inn*, both painted in 1989, with the former drawing upon the idea of the struggle for survival in the face of greed, while the latter recalls the deluded adventurer living in a world of dreams and imaginings. Other important works of the period are his *Gypsy Caravan* series (incorporating philosophical ideas foreshadowed as early as the 1950s, including his interest in the Spanish poet and author, Lorca). The text establishes links between this series, the recent portraits and earlier works. It also reflects upon Olsen's abiding interest in psychological and poetic imagery, and his own peripatetic existence over the years. The chapter provides insights into the works he was doing in Rydal in 1990, drawing together aspects of past and present experience.

Epilogue

The thesis concludes with an account of the work undertaken by the author towards the John Olsen Retrospective exhibition, shown at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1991 and the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1992, as well as with a range of the major critical reviews of the exhibition and assessments of Olsen's contribution to Australian art.

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Notes

. All interviews for this study of John Olsen's art were undertaken between November 1989 and February 1991.
. Works have sometimes been given several different titles by the artist or in commercial venues. Where alternative titles are known these have been listed in the Catalogue of Works towards the end of this document.
. While generally titles include upper-case fonts due to the frequent use of names or poetic titles, occasionally lower-case is applied according to common usage.
. In a few instances works were dated some time after they were created and, where possible, discrepencies have been noted.

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CHAPTER ONE

ORIGINS

Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances. And as the past grows without ceasing, so there is no limit to its preservation.

Memory is not a faculty of putting recollections in a drawer or inscribing them in a register. In its entirety it probably follows us at every instant... leaning over the present which is about to join it, pressing against the portals of consciousness which would feign leave it outside.

These memories, messengers from the unconscious, remind us of what we are dragging behind us unawares.

Henri Bergson[1]

It was with a certain indomitable determination that the twenty-year-old John Olsen decided to commit himself wholeheartedly to an artistic career. This decision was by no means welcomed by his parents who, in 1950, believed that an artist's 'bohemian life' was an altogether unstable and unsuitable course of action for a young man to follow. His family background, schooling and cultural isolation had scarcely provided him with a basis for embarking upon this vocation. Nevertheless, Olsen recalls that his enthusiasm for drawing was the one thing that appeared to remain constant from his youth.

Memory is both cumulative and selective; the past is subtly reforged by our imaginative faculties. When questioned about his childhood recollections, Olsen noted an array of sensations and experiences: feeling overcome at an early age by the smell of his mother's perfume; standing on a wheelbarrow and shouting expletives as Kingsford-Smith flew over Newcastle in 1933; being kicked in the posterior at the age of five by some of the local teenage louts as he waited for his photograph to be taken in the new coat his mother had lovingly made for him. Theatrical, sensitive, vulnerable, outgoing and with a lively sense of humour; these were some of the strands of this artist's multifaceted personality that became evident from his youth.

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[1]Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, Random House, New York, 1944, p.7. This text was an important source of inspiration for Olsen's artistic development in the 1960s.

John Olsen aged five wearing the outfit his mother lovingly made for him.

Olsen has long enjoyed the facility of blurring the edges between fantasy and reality. Where we imagine ourselves to be in the world is often as enlightening as ostensible, factual reality. He agreed with Oscar Wilde's premise that reality often needs to be improved upon; that facts are for bending.[2] Over time he developed a deep affinity with the Celtic imagination which he discovered through the writing of Dylan Thomas, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and W.B. Yeats, as well as in the Book of Kells with its inter-woven, fantastic, metamorphic imagery. For many years he preferred to think of himself as of Irish extraction, although his ancestors were from Scotland (on his mother's side)[3] and Sweden (on his father's side).[4]

John Henry Olsen was born on 21 January 1928 in the city of Newcastle, the first and only son of Esma Agnes (*nee* McCubbin) and Henry (known as Harry) Olsen. Six years later his sister, Pamela was born.

John Olsen's mother was one of nine children. Her talent with a needle and thread was passed down to her by her mother and she worked as a 'tailoress', first in Camden and then in Newcastle. It was an occupation which later enabled her to support her family in difficult circumstances during and after the war. It was tiring and demanding work and she recalls being driven hard by employers on meagre salaries, starting off on about seven shillings and six pence a week. During Olsen's childhood years Esma Olsen made all of her own clothes and those of her children, including hats, coats and socks. Her husband was also in the clothing industry and family photographs from the 1930s reveal their sartorial flair. Harry Olsen became involved in the clothing trade as a young man and, by the time of John's birth, had worked his way up to become one of the main buyers for the Cooee Clothing Company.

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[2] As noted in Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, Penguin Books, London, 1988, when interviewed about his schooling Wilde feigned that he had been tutored at home rather than admitting to Portora Royal School. 'Wilde found it imaginatively seductive to deconstruct his nurture, to obliterate by whim all those sums and paradigms.' Similarly Olsen was not averse to 'obliterating' and reconstructing aspects of his past.

[3] Numerous interviews were conducted with Esma Olsen and one of her sisters, Elsie Liaubon, about their family history. Olsen's great-great grandfather, James McCubbin of Scottish origin, was among the first to take up freehold land in the shire of Coolah in New South Wales, where an inn, 'The Squatters Home' was established. (*Maitland Mercury*, Wednesday 26 July, 1848) His grandfather, also James McCubbin, was one of the pioneer teamsters. His wife, Sarah Jane McCubbin (*nee* Pitkin) at 96 years of age was present at the unveiling of a memorial to the original teamsters.

[4] Olsen's paternal grandfather, Alfred Oscar Olsen, came from Norlade on the east coast of Sweden. He was a stowaway on a ship which arrived in Australia around the 1880s. Alfred Olsen became a fettler on the railway near Tamworth and married Fannie Dorrington (another Scot) and together they had five children.

Esma Olsen. Photographs of the 1930s reveal her sartorial flair.

The year of John Olsen's birth saw the start of the Depression; by 1928 unemployment levels, not only in Newcastle but around Australia, were devastatingly high. His father was one of the fortunate few in Newcastle to retain a well paid job throughout this time. He was an affable man in those days, although even then he was a heavy gambler. Esma Olsen recalls:

> He never made the most of his money, you couldn't depend on him. I didn't work when John was young - in those early years. Through the Depression, a married woman couldn't get a job. You had to stick with it no matter how difficult a marriage was. Harry worked all through the Depression, unlike others we knew. My next door neighbour's husband was laid off work from the steelworks...He used to go to the market near us and buy a bag of onions and often they would have only boiled onions for dinner. That sort of thing is difficult for a lot of people to imagine now.[5]

In a revealing moment in an interview many years later, Olsen recalled: 'I grew up in the worst of the Depression...My earliest images are of people begging for work - not for money; just for a meal. I think it has left me with an outrageous sense of defiance which is one of the things that has helped me to survive.'[6]

Nevertheless his early childhood was a relatively happy one. Although it is common for children to enjoy drawing, Esma Olsen recalled that with her son this was an obsessive passion - he would draw on every scrap of paper, in her cookery books and up the edges of the newspapers - 'nothing was safe'. Most of the drawings were inspired by comic books and it was perhaps in this way that he developed a facility for cartooning, which later provided him with a temporary source of income.

The general home environment was far removed from art or culture; there were no paintings in the walls and Olsen had never visited an art gallery until he was fifteen, that was 'totem temple stuff, too frightening'. In later life Olsen was to develop a passion for poetry, but the only poem he remembers from his early years 'was that absurd poem by Kipling called "If". It was my father's favourite; these days it appears to me to be very male orientated. "If" - 'Then my son you will become a man' - no mentions of sensibility or love. It probably suited the 30's'.[7]

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[5]Esma Olsen, interview with the author, 1990.
[6]See Amanda Lazar, 'Journey into the Festival of Life', *Age*, 6 August, 1977.
[7]John Olsen, *My Complete Graphics*, Australian Galleries and Gryphon Books, Melbourne, 1980, p.26.

From an early age, Olsen had a genial, outgoing temperament with a penchant for the theatrical. 'He's been like that all his life', commented one of his maternal aunts, Elsie Liaubon. 'I remember when he was a little boy he'd pick on a street corner and he'd be blowing on a little flute or banging on a drum.'[8] In those pre-television days, radio was a paramount source of entertainment and of all the radio personalities, Bobby Bluegum had top billing for John Olsen. His mother recollects that he would stand in front of the brass ashtray for hours doing impersonations of him. '[John] used to be very good at mimicking him. He would make these long speeches. I think his imagination used to run away with him. I think he really thought he was Bobby Bluegum. He wouldn't miss the program for the world.'[9]

Although Olsen only spent the first seven years of his life in Newcastle, he has maintained an affection for his origins. 'It is a rather maligned kind of place but it is a kind of soul city - a place of substantial character.' In later years he painted a few works associated with the place such as *Newcastle Coal Boat* (pl.75) and a mural for the Town Hall called *Climbing Sun over the Hunter* in 1981.[10]

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In 1935, Harry Olsen was transferred to Sydney and the family moved to Bondi, where they lived in Santa Barbara Flats. Olsen's love of the ocean would become vividly transformed in many of his paintings in later years. Memories of the freedom of a child immersed in the flux of the tides, of the unselfconscious explorations of a young boy playing along the beach and catching crabs, were recalled in drawings and vibrant gouaches over five decades later. In 1987, looking over a range of accumulated works on paper, Olsen noted: 'A surprise to witness recurring themes. The passing years reveal them. A little boy living by the sea. Rock pools, blue bottles and sea surge.'[11]

In Sydney, John Olsen was sent to Paddington Junior Technical College where he attended classes in metalwork, woodwork and other practical subjects, but showed no aptitude for any of these things. At the outbreak of war in 1939, his father enlisted, his mother and young sister went to stay with relatives in Yass and he was enrolled as a boarder at St. Joseph's College, Sydney.

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[8]Elsie Liaubon, interview with the author, 1990.
[9]Esma Olsen, interview with the author, 1990.
[10]Viewed in Newcastle by the author with the assistance of Andrew Fergusson.
[11]See Deborah Hart, *Encounters with Drawing*, Australian Galleries, Melbourne, 1988, p.7 and plate 29, *Little Boy and Tidal Pool*, 1987.

John and Pamela Olsen (Bondi)

In Olsen's own estimation, his school career was undistinguished. His interests were in English and art, although the standard of art education was paltry. 'I suppose by puberty I hit a certain high, I was the best drawer of nude girls at St. Joseph's College...I belong to the banana and hat period, half an hour before school's end the master would bring out his hat and banana he had not eaten for lunch and say, "Boys draw this"! NEVER WAS THERE A WORD ABOUT CREATIVITY.'[12]

Nevertheless throughout these years he continued drawing and also did several small paintings. One of the few remaining works from this early period is a modest, charming painting, *Lane Cove*, c.1943. (pl.1)

By the end of the war the family was living back in Bondi. 'It was an important place for John', recalls his sister, 'he swam often and some years earlier was the junior backstroke champion of New South Wales.'[13] However he also recalled that at that time Bondi was a rather depressing environment and probably it was graced only by the influence of the beach and the sea.[14]

This reaction was probably influenced in part by the atmosphere of conflict which had begun to cloud their home life. When Harry Olsen returned from the war, he was unwilling or unable to settle back into family life and as a result the home environment became unstable. Esma Olsen explains, 'I think because of his position in his work, he thought that he would be promoted but he went through as a private. He fought in the Middle East...and was involved in the evacuation of Crete. I think that unsettled his nerves. He was later sent to New Guinea. He was never the same after the war and began to drink very heavily'.[15]

In 1943, at the age of fifteen, Olsen received his Leaving Certificate. His sister Pamela commented:

> I think that we were brought up in an environment where my mother and father didn't have a the opportunities to get a very good education because they were brought up in quite large families. So it was considered that by the time a person had reached intermediate stage...it was up to you to make your own way in life.[16]

12Olsen, *My Complete Graphics*, op.cit., p.24.

13Interview with John Olsen's sister, Pamela Collins, 1990.

14Robert Walker, *Painters in the Australian Landscape*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1988, p.99.

15Esma Olsen, interview with the author, 1990.

16Pamela Collins, interview with the author, 1990.

After leaving school John Olsen worked for a time as a clerk for Elder Smith which he disliked intensely. He then discovered that he could sell cartoons and began working as a freelancer, selling his work to various newspapers, and magazines such as 'Man' and 'Fashion Digest'.[17] His sister recalls this period:

> When I was about twelve by which time John was going on nineteen and he well and truly had the artistic flair...he got into a really artistic group. In those days they were considered more bohemian and I was brought up in a protected environment, so I wasn't allowed to be exposed to any of that. So then John virtually did his own thing... Every now and again, I think for monetary reasons he would come back home. He would continually fill sketchbooks with drawings of whoever was around.
>
> He used to always sketch...I'd sit there very patiently and he'd be sizing me up and I'd think, 'This is going to be fantastic'. Then after all that time sitting there, I'd see it and we'd have a ding-dong fight, because I'd say, 'I don't look like that'...Mum would have to be the mediator...[She] was always rousing because his room was always such a mess, lots and lots of paper. He used to like particular corduroy trousers which he would wear constantly and if mum would wash them, he'd feel the character had gone out of them.[18]

By about 1947 John Olsen had decided that he wanted to attend art school and sat for an exam at East Sydney Technical College. He was unsuccessful but a friend told him that he could attend life drawing classes at Datillo Rubbo Art School[19] in the evenings. This he did three times a week in the evenings and on Saturday afternoons. During the day he continued to work as a cartoonist, doing other 'odd jobs at odd times'. For Olsen this was a liberation from the mundane expectations of 'normal life' - he felt as though he had suddenly discovered the people and experiences was had been waiting for all his life. 'Suddenly I was free and flying like a bird.'[20]

The Neapolitan born Datillo Rubbo, had founded his art school a year after his arrival in Sydney in 1898. By the time of Olsen's attendance there, Rubbo was in his late seventies and paid only occasional visits to the school on Saturday

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[17] Unattributed article, 'Images of John Olsen', *Nation*, July 27, 1963, p.10.

[18] Pamela Collins, op.cit.

[19] This information does not appear to be documented in any other previously published accounts or thesis material. It was first mentioned to me in the course of an interview with the artist, Earle Backen, and confirmed by further research, including discussions with Fred Egan and in the original manuscript by Olsen for *My Complete Graphics* held at Australian Galleries in Melbourne.

[20] Olsen, interview with the author. Also noted in *My Complete Graphics*, op.cit. Although in the latter publication Olsen simply noted this comment in relation to going 'to art school', in the original manuscript he referred to Rubbo's.

afternoons. He had left a teaching legacy which was continued in the 1940s by Frances Ellis and Vincent Maestri. Olsen remembers Rubbo 'as quite old and very frail' and that there was in the classes a sensuality in his approach to Impressionism, with the major emphasis being on an Italian approach to figure painting.

The artist, Earle Backen, who was a student at Rubbo's at the same time as Olsen, recalls the balance between an academic approach and allowing a certain freedom: 'a tonal approach to the use of colour in a traditional manner', as well as the sense that one had to be very direct in painting and have feeling. He described Ellis as a very strong painter. 'She had a good, broad way of painting, a tonal approach and that she would be able to block in areas quite quickly. I notice that there have been several exhibitions of Australian women artists but her work is never represented. She thought a lot of John's drawings in the forties.'[21]

Very few of Olsen's works from this period have survived. The two drawings which he did of Earle Backen at the time are at most the first tentative steps at the beginning of his adventure into art. They reveal on the one hand his precision as a cartoonist and on the other a softer, more flexible approach to the figure. He seldom drew with pencil in later years, preferring the fluidity of paint or ink and the malleability of wax crayons and pastels.

A small, accomplished student work, *Head of an old man* c.1948 (pl.2) is a fine example of the tonal approach to the figure at Rubbo's, encompassing a surety with paint and a physical and psychological presence. Another former student, Fred Egan, recalls: 'We used to have models - Frank White, a big chesty bloke and Pearly. Rubbo's was very academic. The building was important - there was a northern light in the roof and it really delineated heads beautifully. Rubbo's was known for the cadmium yellows in the paintings of the figure; whereas Ashton's was monochromes and light red. There were no shadows at Ashton's. The portraits at Rubbo's were more Rembrandtesque'.[22]

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[21]Earle Backen, interview with the author, 1989.

[22]Fred Egan, telephone conversation with the author. Egan also made the following comments that are revealing of the period and John Olsen's relationship with his father who disapproved of the artistic or 'bohemian' life. 'Olsen was doing these great cartoons - "jest a minute"- for the press... John's father was rather hostile. "Who are these lunatics?" I'd done a trade, we'd expected things to collapse after the war. John kept telling me I ought to drop my job and go with him to Melbourne. He said I was too security conscious...that such attitudes were...bourgeois...One Saturday morning I decided that was it and went around to tell him [I was going with him]. He walked around with his hands in his pockets and later said that his father had blown up and that he couldn't go.'

There were a number of cafes, clubs and coffee shops in the 1940s where artists and writers used to congregate. One of the favourites which Olsen went to was the Lincoln Inn coffee shop, a rather dingy place brought to prominence by the people who frequented it.[23] The shrewd managers of the place had employed art and university students as waitresses, who in turn brought their friends. Egan recalls: 'There were people from Ashton's there...a lot from Uni and about four from Rubbo's. Clem Millward went there, as did Reg Sher, Dick Appleton, Maurie Sales. Even then in 1948 they were coming out with 128 pounds clear a week. There were articles about the place in the press headed "Bohemia in Rowe Street". Barry Kennedy was there. It was a crazy place, a bit unsettling.'[24] An unattributed cover article on John Olsen in *Nation*, July, 1963 (probably by George Munster)[25] takes this further.

> The pubs then used to close at six but the Lincoln was open till twelve.
>
> If you cared to listen you could get a free lecture on poetry from Lex Banning and on anarchism from Harry Hooton...
>
> On the Lincoln walls Olsen first showed his work - cartoons he had been drawing. He was even then the least diffident and most sociable of persons. With the budding poet Richard Appleton, he collected a set of his own around him. Appleton and he, it seems, were the authors of the Lincoln anthem:
>
> *When I was young, I used to go drinking;*
> *'Twas first to the Long Bar and then to the Lincoln.*
> *I gave a big party for folks who were arty,*
> *At five in the morning it was going right strong.*
> *The very next day I got dispossessed...*

For Olsen, cartooning was initially a way of earning a living and a practical way to continue his interest in drawing. Like other of his contemporaries, his upbringing had not exposed him to art exhibitions and when he started at Rubbo's he had seen very few art works, even in reproduction. In the late 1940s he first saw prints by Van Gogh and Cézanne. Clearly these were no substitute for the originals, but it was a start at least. These could be found at Carl Plate's Notanda galleries and bookshop in Rowe Street. It was here that many young Sydney artists gained some

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[23] See Geoffrey Dutton, *The Innovators: the Sydney alternatives in the rise of modern art, literature and ideas*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1986. See also Anne Coombs, *Sex and Anarchy - The life and death of the Sydney Push*, Viking, Sydney, 1996, p.21. Olsen was known to the Push although he was not directly involved.

[24] ibid.

[25] Dutton, *The Innovators,* op.cit.

access to international contemporary art through reproductions, magazines and books. At a time when there was an antagonism towards contemporary art by a large proportion of the general public, not to mention the rear-guard action of the trustees of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Plate's initiatives played a valuable role.

It was at Plate's that Olsen confirmed his passion for literature. 'I went to Carl Plate's bookshop when I was sixteen. He had a very good selection and to begin with I bought summaries and Plato's *Republic*. It was just an impulse and I found that I could read it and enjoy it. I mean if I could understand Plato's *Republic* I had the potential to develop, and I did. After that it was an avalanche of things. I felt that I had arrived at the fountain.' Olsen's deep attachment during the years that followed to a wide range of poetry, prose and philosophy was based on genuine enjoyment and intellectual curiosity. It provided him with a rich ballast of ideas and emotional connections which he often drew upon in his art, his writing and his way of life.

By the end of the decade John Olsen knew that above all else he wanted to become a serious artist. The classes at Rubbo's were discontinued and he decided to enrol at the Julian Ashton Art School. His sister Pamela recalls that he received no support from his family. 'He never had any encouragement at all and I think it was considered a very useless career to follow. His father in particular was disappointed in him. It was just sheer determination and tenacity regardless of what anyone else thought. He believed in himself where many didn't - it is not an easy thing to do.'[26]

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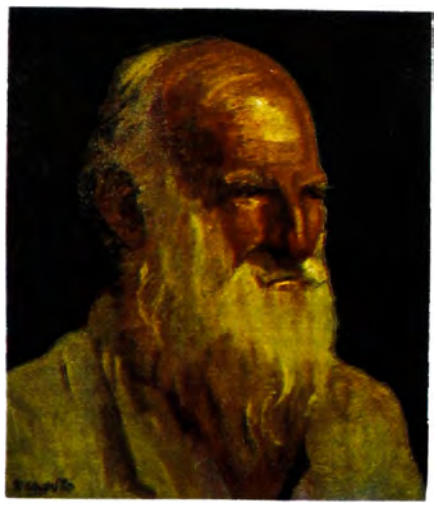
[26] Pamela Collins, op. cit.

fig.1 *Cartoons* c.1943, watercolour on paper, 42 x 30cm
Private collection

fig.2 *Earle Backen* c.1947,
pen, pencil, ink and wash, 38 x 27.5cm
Private Collection

pl.1 *Lane Cove* c.1943, oil on board, 24 x 17.2cm
Collection of the artist



pl.2 *Head of an old man* 1950, oil on board, 42 x 37cm
Collection of the artist

CHAPTER TWO

TRAINING AND BREAKING FREE: 1950 – 1956

Whoever the master is whom you prefer, this must be only a directive. Otherwise you will never be anything but an imitator. With any feeling for nature whatever and some fortunate gifts - and you have some - you should be able to dissociate yourself; advice, the methods of another must not make you change your own manner of feeling. Should you at the moment be under the influence of one who is older than you, believe me as soon as you begin to find yourself, your emotions will finally emerge and conquer their place in the sun - get the upper hand, confidence - what you must strive to attain is a good method of construction.

Letter from Paul Cézanne to a younger artist, Aix, 1904.[27]

By the early 1950s John Olsen had decided to do everything in his power to become a dedicated artist. Three and a half decades later, in a revealing ink drawing and attendant comments (fig.3), he paid tribute to the teacher and mentor who provided the cornerstone of his early artistic development – John Passmore. It is the most autobiographical portrait in the series, *Letters to a Young Artist*, in which he sought to convey to younger artists the significance of belonging to a rich artistic heritage. This did not imply unqualified veneration, but rather the human vulnerability, ambiguities and strengths involved in becoming an artist – to learn and build on the lessons of one's predecessors – and also to have the courage to break free.

In this tender and critical portrait, Olsen combines a physical and inner likeness through the meandering and quixotic fragmentation of line: line articulates with precision Passmore's facial features, his round steel-rimmed glasses; it fragments, regroups and becomes wayward in a gesticulating arm. This is Olsen's memory of his gifted teacher, who introduced him to the idea of art as 'something sacred', as a frail, old man on his deathbed, isolated by his dogged insularity and the exceedingly high standards he imposed both on himself and those with whom he came into contact.

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[27] H.B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, University of California Press, Berkley, Los Angeles and London, 1988, p.20. Letter from Paul Cézanne to a young artist, Charles Chamoin.

In his written commentary John Olsen provides some insights into an intense, rewarding and difficult relationship. In the first instance artistic forbears demand allegiance; they can be both a liberating force and an incarceration. The struggle for independence demands persistence and can provoke frustration at perceived or enforced limitations of origins.

Although other teachers such as Desiderius Orban and Godfrey Miller played a significant role in Olsen's training, none rivalled the profound impression made by Passmore. From the early stages of their association, it rapidly became evident that Olsen was also Passmore's 'favourite son', and by the middle of the decade the master was being stimulated by his student's ideas. To understand the underlying complexity of this relationship and its bearing on Olsen's artistic development, it is necessary to return to the context of the early 1950s in Australia when he was a young and eager student on the threshold of experiencing art as a serious vocation.

In the broad context, the 1950s in Australia was a period of increased prosperity after the war years. This was the Menzies era, when conservative attitudes dominated the community at large. The growing consumer economy, encouraged by manufacturers, government and the popular press, was portrayed in the form of typical suburban life with its 'catalogue of family possessions': refrigerators, washing machines, television sets and the ubiquitous Holden. This post-war affluence with its focus on home and garden was supported by advertising campaigns structured around the imagery of 'the Australian Way of Life'.[28]

Financial rewards did not for the most part flow on to artists, who were generally paid very little for their work. Venues for exhibiting were limited in Sydney, with Macquarie Galleries being the main independent commercial gallery.[29] On an institutional level, there was a hostile attitude towards contemporary art among the trustees of the Art Gallery of New South Wales (then called the National Art Gallery) and, prior to 1953, the younger generation of artists had virtually no direct contact with twentieth-century European or American art.

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[28] Richard White, *Inventing Australia*, George Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1981, p.164. White's chapter 'Everyman and his Holden' provides an engaging insight into the social history of this period.

[29] David Jones Art Gallery also played a role and showed a significant exhibition of Aboriginal art in 1949. See Christine France, *New Directions 1952 - 1962*, The Lewers Bequest and Penrith Regional Art Gallery, 1991, p.10.

It was against this background that the return of John Passmore and Robert Klippel from Europe, as well as the 'French Painting Today' exhibition in 1953, were welcomed with great enthusiasm by Olsen and his contemporaries in Sydney.

In 1950 John Olsen enrolled as a student at the Julian Ashton Art School in the Mining Museum building in George Street, in close proximity to the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Despite the considerable drop in income he soon decided to abandon cartooning because it conflicted in time, intention and energy with his desire to reach a more advanced level in his artistic development. Instead he attended classes during the day and worked as a cleaner at night in the 'clinic for crippled children' in North Sydney. Fellow student Andrew Fergusson recalls:

> Olsen used to work in the children's hospital and I worked at Hoyts Theatre cleaning the offices...We used to meet as a group before going to work in the evening at Repin's coffee shop in King Street... Looking back on it, we worked fairly hard. We'd start at Ashton's at 9.30 a.m. and later we would work till 11.00 p.m. Physically it was a long day.[30]

Among the other students at Ashton's who at different times attended the same classes as Olsen were Peter Upward, Yvonne Audette, Charles Lloyd and, for a very brief time, Bill Rose (with whom Olsen was to develop a sustained friendship). A number of these artists would frequently meet in pubs and coffee shops after art classes to engage in lively conversations about art. These discussions were intensified early in 1953 after Olsen met Robert Klippel. Olsen recalls that as students they used to walk everywhere; that the city was generally much more accessible and provincial than it later became.

During his first year at Ashton's Olsen attended drawing classes with Henry Gibbons and composition and design with Jean Appleton. Although Ashton's had experienced something of a decline after the 1930s, the school had a proud record of past students including George Lambert, William Dobell, Sydney Long, Margaret Preston, Roland Wakelin and Lloyd Rees. Many years later Olsen was to express the sense of identity and connection he felt with the past as a result of his time there. Such feelings were symptomatic of the tensions that were to develop in his own work and attitudes: between belonging to an Australian tradition – a deep, romantic attachment to his local environment – and wanting to encompass broader horizons and break new ground.

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[30] Andrew Fergusson, interview with the author. Fergusson continued to work as an artist after leaving Ashton's and later became the Director of the Newcastle Region Art Gallery.

The school had been founded in 1896 by Julian Rossi Ashton who maintained a considerable presence there until his death in 1942. Olsen noted that he provided remarkable links with Australia's political and cultural past: as an illustrator for *The Illustrated Australian News*, Ashton had covered the dramatic events of the arrest of Ned Kelly in 1880 and the subsequent trial;[31] he had also been closely associated with prominent nineteenth-century artists such as Louis Buvelot, Charles Conder and Giralomo Nerli and had participated in artists camps in the 1880s and 1890s.

Henry Gibbons, who taught John Olsen draughtsmanship in 1950, had joined the school in 1923 and worked closely with Ashton, first as a student and later as a teacher. He had also been taught by one of Ashton's most successful students – George Lambert. Lambert, a talented painter and an academician, became the darling of the Sydney public in the 1920s and was upheld by reactionaries as one of the 'Olympians' whose altar was being desecrated by the modernists in the 1930s and 1940s.[32] After Julian Ashton's death in 1942 Gibbons took over as principal of the school. He was by all accounts an elegant, stylish man who insisted on formal standards of conduct and rigorous training based on traditional nineteenth-century methods. The academic training was much the same as that of the National Gallery School in Victoria, which meant that to begin with, students had to concentrate on copying from plaster casts. Olsen recalls:

> It was partly understood that one spent a long period of time in an antique class and did copies of the millionth impression of the Venus de Milo...Ashton's was a very long, long room that overlooked Sydney Harbour and there was a whole parade of Victorian Gothics – many objects that were supposed to give you the cultural bit; and you weren't allowed into the life drawing classes for a very long period of time. I was very young at the time and it was probably a good idea to keep me out of there.
>
> ...I would be standing there...looking over this wretched thing that I am drawing...and the discourse went like this...'Is the nose too long, Mr. Olsen? Are the ears in the proper relationship to the nose? Is the forehead too large in relationship to the head? I think Mr. Olsen you had better start again.'[33]

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31 Transcript of John Olsen's Festival of Perth lecture at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, 16 February 1978.

32 Richard Haese, *Rebels and Precursors*, Allen Lane, Penguin, Melbourne, 1981, p.5. A letter from R.H. Croll to Lionel Lindsay: 'The bright young things of the studios boast that their works reflects their minds. By God they do!...they blaspheme the Olympians - the Streetons and the Lamberts, and sacrifice filth upon the altars of the new gods they serve'. Lindsay, who was a trustee at the Art Gallery of New South Wales from 1918-29 and 1934-49, shared these views and was an ardent anti-modernist into the 1950s.

33 John Olsen, Festival of Perth lecture, op.cit.

It was a harrowing procedure and one that many students found limiting at the time. A decade later, Olsen commented that he did not regret his academic training, that craftsmanship could be valuable to an artist, even where it was not immediately apparent, but that it could only be seen as a beginning. The obvious limitation of the Gibbons's approach was that it demanded accurate 'rendering', precluding a more imaginative response to the figure. Furthermore, there was a disregard for the developments that had taken place in twentieth-century art in general.

Although communications between young artists in Melbourne and Sydney were limited in the early 1950s, Olsen recalls that a number of students who were becoming interested in the 'modern movement' had heard of the George Bell School in Melbourne, where a more progressive approach was encouraged.[34] Although he briefly considered moving south, lack of funds and limited confidence precluded this from occurring.

The gap was fortuitously filled early in the following year with the arrival of John Passmore in Sydney after a seventeen-year absence in Europe. The cyclical nature of events is striking. Passmore had been a student of Henry Gibbons some twenty years previously and was critical of his teaching methods, which he saw as merely handing down 'the recipes of Lambert'.[35] Nevertheless he was welcomed back to the school, where he taught from the beginning of 1951 until 1954. For many of the students at Ashton's, whose opinions about art were still largely unformed, and who were open to new ideas and keen to learn from his contact with European art, Passmore's impact was swift and intense.

Passmore's art and attitudes had been considerably shaped by his European experiences. It was the English artist, Keith Vaughan (whom he befriended while they were working together as commercial artists at Lintas in London) who initially encouraged him to look to the work of Cézanne and Picasso.[36] Passmore developed a passion for Cézanne and made an assiduous study of his work. His scumbled paint surfaces and desire to develop and destroy the human figure simultaneously also betrayed his interest in the English artist, Walter Sickert. Olsen recalls

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[34] Olsen interview with the author. George Bell founded the Bell-Shore School in 1932, which soon became the centre of the modern movement in Melbourne and was attended by artists such as Russell Drysdale and Fred Williams.

[35] Barry Pearce, *John Passmore 1904 - 1984*, Retrospective exhibition catalogue, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1985.

[36] ibid. Pearce notes that it was particularly Picasso's 'blue period' that Vaughan encouraged Passmore to consider.

Passmore's keen interest in Sickert, although Passmore rarely openly admitted this allegiance to his students, generally referring to him obliquely through Sickert's mentor, Degas.

Among Passmore's most successful paintings are those of the water's edge, of figures diving, swimming, bending, arms descending and connecting with the shifting tides (see fig.4). In November 1951, at the time of Passmore's first exhibition since his return to Australia at Macquarie Galleries in Sydney, James Gleeson wrote, '...one feels that beneath the logical facade of these Cézanne-like paintings there is a turbulent spirit who embraces the restraint of a highly intellectual style as a safeguard against emotionalism. They are shot through with dark tones of a macabre imagination'.[37] It was as though Passmore was attempting to bring Cézanne's *Bathers* to the shimmering Sydney waterfront, while lurking in their midst were the brooding memories of the Edgar Allan Poe stories he had been read as a child.[38]

Most of the artists and students who encountered Passmore during these years recall his extraordinary psychic intensity and his intolerance for anything that appeared to him to approximate mediocrity, either on a personal or artistic level. In his own work and teaching there was a continual oscillation between a rigorous discipline on the one hand, and a passionate, romantic sensibility on the other.

Passmore's teaching was dominated by two contradictory streams of thought: the sanctity of Cézanne – the significance of structure and spatial relations in painting – and the fluid, expressive response to the human form in the drawing classes. Taken to its outer limits (and Passmore was an extremist) this involved the equivocation between, on the one hand, a fanatical insistence on the significance of each individual brush mark and, on the other, a fugitive regard for materials, where the process became more important than the end result.

From the start Passmore demanded of his students the awesome realisation that art was 'a mystic vocation'.[39] He was the first to indelibly impress upon them the idea that art could assume a significance in its own right, which in turn required an ethical obligation to standards. 'He had the rare quality', Olsen later recalled, 'that

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[37] *Sun* (Sydney), 22 November 1951.

[38] Pearce, op.cit. notes that Passmore recalled his father reading to him from Edgar Allen Poe's *The Raven*.

[39] This was probably initially inspired by the intensity of one of his teachers at the Westminster School in London, Mark Gertler.

he could feel what was required to become a great artist, at least to put oneself on the stage to begin. It was an act of personal genius to which all who knew him responded.'[40] He ran his classes like a chapel, where people spoke in hushed voices and the emphasis was on hard work and intense concentration.

Passmore could be immensely enthusiastic at certain times and harsh and acerbic at others. He had the facility to psychologically manipulate his students, playing them off against one another. If an individual offended him, one of his weapons was to cease communication with that person, sometimes for as long as two or three weeks. 'He worked on the jealously principle...You knew you had been forgiven when the other students were sent over to see the work that you were doing.'[41] Olsen recalls:

> Most people respected him but were terrified of him in person. He had an instinct to put the pins exactly into anyone's individual weakness. My lockings with him had a similar ring; he loved my student work because above all things I never questioned him and idolised him.[42]

At Ashton's, Passmore painted in a partitioned-off space alongside the teaching area and created an atmosphere of great secrecy around his work, seldom allowing his students as much as a glimpse at what he was doing. This created an ironic problem in that the inflated expectations he often imposed on his students would later be imposed on him by them. For these impressionable young artists who held him in great awe, who felt that they must surely be in touch with 'one of the great mysteries of creation',[43] it is not surprising that when they saw his work, both at that time and many years later when they attended his Retrospective exhibition, they felt disappointed.

The drawing classes were based on the humanist tradition and for Olsen it was here that the side of his teacher's personality he most admired came through: 'a rich human side which drained itself through to Rembrandt, Sickert, Degas'. After Gibbons's academic method, which advocated copying the external reality of the figure, Passmore's approach was revelatory. In the life drawing classes he discussed the human figure with great conviction, touching on its action, its

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40 'The Artist as writer - Extracts from the journal of John Olsen', *Weekend Australian*, 7 July 1985.
41 Andrew Fergusson, interview with the author, 1990.
42 See Olsen, *Weekend Australian*, op. cit.
43 ibid.

character and its basic anatomy, often accompanying these talks with small charcoal demonstration drawings. It was not a didactic study of anatomy, but rather a concentration on the essential structure of the body by its translation into broad, geometric units, based partly on Egyptian art and Archaic Greek sculpture (which, in part, also led to a tentative grasp of analytical cubism). This provided the artist with a basic schema that could be given vitality through the fusion of these simple solids into the complex articulation of the human body (fig.5).

Students were also encouraged to think of the skeletal structure and the interconnections of the parts to the whole.

> The bone is the foundation and the muscle is the mechanism...there is an arm and a leg and the muscles are like clusters of elastic bands that move. So you may be looking at the figure as an outside phenomenon but your eye is being attuned to looking inside it and sometimes we would add to it.[44]

On a psychological level the interior life of the figure was based on Passmore's admiration for artists such as Rembrandt and Breugel. Olsen recalls that the vitality of the figure was often related to Rembrandt's flexibility of line, given substance by the fluctuations of chiaroscuro.

Among the most significant aspects of Passmore's teaching, for Olsen, were the so-called 'composition' classes in which students were encouraged to work on newspaper, laying down broad washes of gouache over which they would draw landscapes or figures in a very general way. The emphasis on informality and discovery in the process of painting and drawing was the key. This provided an essential link with an idea flowing through so much of Olsen's later work – Paul Klee's 'don't think of form, think of forming'. Students were discouraged from the idea of producing a finished work. 'When we wanted to paint pictures in these classes we were considered shabby.' They were not allowed to use materials of high quality in the early stages; instead, bundles of the *Sydney Morning Herald* were brought in and only a few gouache colours were used. Very few of these drawings on newspaper survive, for the simple reason that they were not intended to. However an insight can be gained from a small number of works Olsen did some forty years later (around the time when he drew the portrait of Passmore) that recollected the original idea (figs.6 and 7).

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[44] Olsen, interview with the author for the earlier publication, *Encounters with Drawing*, Australian Galleries, 1988.

For Olsen drawing was to become a profound activity. He was to develop an extraordinary facility for drawing with the brush, thereby reducing the distinctions often implied between painting and drawing. Passmore's notion of drawing as a process of exploration, as well as the idea 'it is not what you see but what you know', was of seminal importance to John Olsen's subsequent development. It was not so much a rejection of the visible world, as an attempt to penetrate beyond superficial appearances to a deeper level of understanding and feeling. The idea of the figure as having a dynamic inner energy, and of the world as not clinically observed but passionately felt and experienced, would reverberate, be re-explored and extended on multiple levels by Olsen over four decades of work.

The formal painting classes were focused firmly on Cézanne. Students were instructed to apply a prismatic range of small touches of oil paint, premixed on the palette and applied with a sable brush onto the surface, which was either oil sketching paper or canvas. The surface was then gradually built up, often scumbling one layer into another.[45] Passmore demanded that his students think of each individual brushmark and of the inter-relationship of colour – of warm colours coming forward and cool colours receding – and of the structural integrity of the whole. It took a long time to cover a small area. 'Looking at a miserable still life of mine', Olsen recalls, 'he would say, "Where there's white, there's hope... If you can get a few significant touches down, that's better than covering the painting with mud".'[46]

One of Olsen's early attempts in this manner was *Still Life* c.1951 (pl.3), exhibited with the Society of Artists in 1952; it was hung alongside Passmore's *Hot Afternoon*. The *Sydney Morning Herald* art critic, Paul Haefliger, pointed to the dominant trends in the show: 'John Passmore presides over the Academie Cézanne, while the artist Wallace Thornton boosts Bonnard: – a fight between intellect and emotion, or so it should have been had the exponents not so often reversed roles'. He commented on the awkwardness and disintegration of form in Passmore's painting while 'other disciples here have more unity because they have not yet learned to disintegrate the forms. John Olsen's "Still Life" is a good example'.[47]

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[45] This scumbling technique also bears comparison with some of Walter Sickert's and Degas's paintings.
[46] Olsen, interview with the author.
[47] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 August 1952.

Passmore's rigorous discipline and insistence on the serious nature of painting and the relevance of each mark led to a tentativeness and frustration among many of his students, and progress was slow. It would take Olsen another two years before a more distinctive sensibility began to emerge in paintings such as the considerably more daring *Still Life with boy* (pl.4). While the composition is still somewhat unresolved, there is a move towards a flattening of space and distortion of form in order to make the whole more spatially malleable. Furthermore, the figure clearly reveals the adoption of Passmore's method of construction in basic units. The painting preempts his subsequent work: the awkwardness of the boy with his raised arms and the suggestion of a poetic susceptibility would become liberated through line in *The Bicycle Boys Rejoice* of the following year.

Passmore's version of Cézanne provided Olsen with a sound basis for understanding pictorial construction, and his discipline provided a means of 'holding the romantic self together'.[48] However Olsen also later commented that, in a sense, in the early 1950s, he was 'put to jail over Cézanne'.

> We're at art school believing that this is it, and he had us to the point that we weren't even allowed to reason it out...The reproductions weren't that great. Furthermore Passmore was brainwashing us to such an extent that when we did look at the reproductions and we didn't see them corresponding to the theories that he was expounding, we would say, 'Well, it's a bad reproduction'. When I went to Europe and saw them, I would see [that] Passmore contrived a theory that Cézanne himself never strictly followed.[49]

One of the difficulties with such an intense focus on a particular artist was that the students had never seen an original Cézanne. Robert Hughes wrote: 'There is no tyranny like the tyranny of the unseen masterpiece. That was our predicament. In Australia we had art schools teaching people how to paint Cézannes, but our museums had no Cézannes to show us. The seen and fully experienced masterpiece tends to liberate. Great art is seldom repressive'.[50] Although reproductions played a necessary and at times helpful role, it was precisely this authenticity of experience in front of the works themselves that made the 'French Painting Today' exhibition,

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[48] John Olsen, *In Search of the Open Country 1961 - 1986*, Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, 1986.

[49] Olsen, interview with the author. This idea of feeling 'brainwashed' by Passmore reveals Olsen's frustration in retrospect with his own and other student's initial unqualified veneration of their teacher.

[50] Robert Hughes, *Nothing If Not Critical*, Collins Harvill, London, 1990, p.4. The National Gallery of Victoria did have one undated Cézanne painting which was part of the Felton Bequest 1938.

which came to Australia in 1953, so important for the younger generation of artists.[51]

In the 1950s art teaching generally focused on major European artists and students were discouraged from thinking in terms of a local tradition. Olsen recalls that Passmore 'saw Frank Hinder as doing design and Grace Cossington Smith as Cézanne doing knitting!'.[52] Not particular to Passmore was the dismissal of those Sydney artists who came to prominence in the 1940s and became pejoratively known as the 'Charm School'. In the 1950s, the term 'Charm School' 'had become a phrase of final damnation, indiscriminately applied to anything that didn't seem harsh and committed'.[53] Furthermore, from Passmore's viewpoint those who looked to Bonnard and Matisse as sources of inspiration were following paths altogether too sensuous and decorative.

Among the few Australian artists Passmore did respect were Godfrey Miller and Ian Fairweather, primarily because of their overriding, serious commitment to art before all else.[54] Olsen shared this regard and developed a deep interest in Fairweather's art in particular; in relation to the distinctive linear emphasis of drawing with paint, the connection with Chinese art and the genuine sensibility that shone through the often arbitrary use of materials. Robert Hughes later recalled this admiration: 'I can remember John proposing that we carry Fairweather's *Monastery* through the streets of Sydney in procession, as Cimabues and Duccios had been paraded in Florence and Siena in the trecento...'.[55]

In relation to Godfrey Miller, Olsen preferred his drawings to his paintings. Miller's paintings are constructed in an exceptionally painstaking way, built up out of the most minute, fragmented, reverberating facets. Olsen noted that both Miller and Passmore considered that Cézanne had reached a threshold which precluded the leap into the subsequent dramatic discoveries of Cubism made by Picasso and Braque.

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[51] The 'French Painting Today' exhibition is discussed in greater depth in the following chapter.

[52] Olsen, interview with the author. This comment about Cossington Smith may also be seen to be corresponding with a general lack of adequate recognition of women artists during the 1950s. However, in the case of Passmore, his criticism of artists extended beyond gender as the other comments here indicate.

[53] Robert Hughes, *Donald Friend*, Edwards & Shaw, Sydney, 1965, p.73.

[54] However Olsen also noted that in relation to the work itself, Passmore was critical of Miller's perfectionism. 'Miller would have him back in church whereas he believed in Rembrandt's *Flayed Ox*. Olsen, interview with the author for *Encounters with Drawing*, op.cit.

[55] Quoted in Geoffrey Dutton, *The Innovators*, Macmillan Australia, 1986, p.191. Fairweather's interest in process, in Chinese calligraphy and in bridging the gap between the figurative and non-figurative world were to become vitally important aspects of Olsen's later development. This admiration is further expounded in a drawing that Olsen did of Fairweather in 1987, see Deborah Hart, *Encounters with Drawing*, op.cit., pp.88, 89.

Furthermore, while their work was quite different, their attempts for perfection and their rigid discipline in painting later appeared limiting to Olsen. 'Fairweather never had that problem; he didn't feel trapped in the valleys of Mt Saint Victoire.'

During the early 1950s, Olsen attended classes at East Sydney Technical College on a part-time basis with Miller. Although his impact was less intense than that of Passmore, Olsen was impressed by Miller's spiritual presence, by the 'air of purity about him'. He also recalls this teacher's genuine concern for his students: 'He would come up behind you and sensitively approach the work. I'm working on a still life with lemons in it and I don't think its going very well, and he would say, "Don't touch it...leave it just the way it is". He could really generate a caring atmosphere'. Miller instilled into his students a sense of construction and discipline, but he wasn't a didactic teacher. In the life classes he encouraged his students to keep the forms large based on Masaccio and Piero della Francesca. This approach is evident in the figures in Olsen's painting *The Sea of Galilee* (fig.8) which was entered in the Blake Prize in 1954 and also bears a close comparison with Passmore's *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes*, 1952.[56]

Apart from the observations of Passmore and Miller relating directly to painting and drawing, the 1950s was also an important time in Olsen's development in relation to his interest in literature and philosophy. Once again Passmore's impact was predominant. It was a continuation of Passmore's own training under Bernard Meninsky in London, who stressed the importance of developing the intellect through reading, of 'gleaning the essence of great writers by discussion'.[57] Olsen was by this time already becoming a prolific reader and responded enthusiastically to his teacher's encouragement. Like so many of the post-war generation he greatly admired T.S. Eliot, and essential reading for all students was Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', which concludes:

> The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. And he is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives not merely in the present but in the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead but what is already living.[58]

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[56] See Pearce, op.cit. plate 20, p.47.

[57] Bernard Meninsky also made a considerable impact on other Australian artists including Russell Drysdale, Jean Bellette and Paul Haefliger.

[58] T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, Penguin, London, 1953, p.30. In one sense this idea of impersonality seems at odds with Olsen's later work. However, it does link up with his commitment to being a part of an evolving tradition.

The idea of bringing the past into the present corresponded with Olsen's interest in the writings of the philosopher Henri Bergson. While the idea of impersonality at face value appears to be remote from Olsen's romantic temperament and much of his mature work, it implied for him a freedom from artistic isolation, of belonging to a rich tradition bigger than the individual self: 'You are not simply expressing yourself, you are enjoying the tradition of art...and it is a very good thing for a student to know because from that point on you become a real student'. On another level it also corresponded with his desire, a little later in the decade, to transcend immediate reality in the *View of the Western World* series, 1956, and his growing interest in mysticism and Eastern philosophy; ideas which were also stimulated by his discussions with Robert Klippel.

Klippel remembers first hearing of Olsen in 1952 from Mary Flower at the Lincoln Inn coffee shop. 'She said that she had married this artist bloke, John Olsen.' Olsen married Mary Flower (now McNish), the niece of the artist Cedric Flower, in April 1951; a year later, in September, their daughter Jane was born. Olsen later did a small, affectionate study, *Mary bathing Jane*, 1953 (fig.9), an example of his student work 'after Degas' while under Passmore's tuition. In his own estimation he was, temperamentally, young and not ready for marriage; factors compounded by his high regard for Passmore in those years, who believed that marriage and Australian suburban life were incompatible with becoming a great artist.[59]

Robert Klippel recalls that in the early stages of their acquaintance, he found Olsen quite serious and meditative. 'I remember driving across the bridge with him...He seemed like a very quiet, unassuming bloke; a totally different personality to the way most people later thought of him.'[60] Olsen's devotion to Passmore and his belief in an ethical commitment to standards in art often engendered in him feelings of anxiety and doubt that he rarely exposed to others. The other aspects of his personality becoming evident to fellow students at this time were his infectious humour, vitality and sense of fun.

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[59] Mary McNish recalls Passmore's influence as being destructive at times. See also Pearce, op.cit. Passmore often discontinued friendships with other artists on the basis that he considered that their marriages precluded total commitment to their art. He had married in 1923 but found that it stifled his creative talent. He developed an aversion to suburban life; leaving his family in 1933 when he went to Europe. On his return to Sydney he lived in isolation.

[60] Robert Klippel, interview with the author. This is an interesting insight because Olsen's exuberance masked the more meditative, self-doubting aspects of his personality over many years.

Klippel, a gifted, non-figurative sculptor, had returned to Sydney after seven years in Europe. During 1953 he met frequently with Olsen, Bill Rose, Eric Smith and occasionally John Passmore to work together and discuss art, literature and philosophy. He was one of the few at that time to have had direct contact with European art after the Second World War. He had met André Breton and members of the Surrealist group in Paris and was also well acquainted with the work of Jean Riopelle, even bringing a few of his works back to Australia. 'I had two Riopelle paintings and a whole lot of his drawings and watercolours. There was no reaction.'[61]

For Olsen they were 'too formless' and he far preferred the works he saw in the 'French Painting Today' exhibition later in the year.[62] More significant were their general discussions about art and philosophy; in particular, their shared interest in comparative religion, especially in Krishnamurti, and in T.S. Eliot. The idea of *Zeitgeist*, of attempting to attain a spiritual dimension in their art, would play a significant role in Olsen's subsequent development.

Klippel recalls that the move towards abstraction in Sydney was only very gradual in the early 1950s. Of all the artists to feel the weight of parochial attitudes in Sydney at this time, his experience was among the most despondent.

> It was absolutely unbelievable...I had a show with Ralph Balson at Macquarie Galleries in 1952. Nothing sold. It was just hopeless... You had to work full-time at all kinds of jobs...Everything felt closed for non-figurative art and my work suffered.[63]

At the Art Gallery of New South Wales (then known as the National Art Gallery) there was a forceful rear-guard action among the trustees endeavouring to protect the place from the onslaught of 'dangerous modernism'. In the mid to late 1940s the Director, Hal Missingham, had purchased works by Russell Drysdale and Sidney Nolan considered to be too avant-garde by the trustees. One of these paintings was Nolan's lyrical and irrational *Pretty Polly Mine*, 1948 (the period of his work which would be important for artists like Olsen and Colin Lanceley in the early 1960s).

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61 ibid.

62 Olsen would later associate his reaction to Riopelle's work with his feeling for Jackson Pollock's mature paintings, which he felt lacked sufficient content.

63 Klippel interview with the author.

The trustees were shocked by the purchase and, after a vote of censure, Missingham was relieved of his power of purchase.[64]

In 1952 the Archibald Prize at the Art Gallery was awarded, for the seventh time in a row, to William Dargie; an occurrence which sparked a revolt among younger artists. It was not only the sense of devastating predictability that infuriated these vocal artists, but also the academic nature of the portrait of Essingdon Lewis, which represented a total lack of support for contemporary ideas. John Olsen was at the forefront of the Anti-Archibald demonstration on 24 January 1953, when a group of students (variously estimated as twenty or 'about forty') marched on the gallery. On that day the *Sun* reported 'Students Brawl in Gallery' and 'A violent clash' between students and attendants; one student was taken away for questioning and later released. The placards caused amusement among spectators with such slogans as 'Archibald Decision Death to Art!' and 'Don't Hang Dargie Hang the Trustees'. The following Monday the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported:

> Only one, John Olsen...revealed his name. Mr Olsen said, 'We realize that nothing will come of our action, but we do not want public apathy to be accepted by the Trustees of the Gallery as an indication that their choice has been vindicated...We've got artists but they don't get a chance. Dargie has nothing to do with art. Dobell has a feeling for art...' Then Mr Olsen and his colleagues went to a car and selected a banner and placards. A woman produced a Dachshund dog and tied a placard to its lead...'Winner Archibald Prize, William Doggie'. The students then descended to the Gallery ...the dog was ejected.[65]

An exhibition of rejected works was subsequently held at the Education Department Gallery. Prior to the opening the artist, Jeffrey Smart, then art critic for the *Daily Telegraph*, wrote an article praising the rejects from both the Archibald and Wynne Prizes.[66] He also made a scathing attack on the trustees, criticising their lack of qualifications and the fact that they were appointed for life – a policy which needed to be reformed at government level. Promises of reforms to the trustees' term of office had been made in 1945, but nothing had been done.

The article gave a boost to Olsen and his fellow demonstrators who decided, on Jeffrey Smart's advice, to follow up their actions at the opening of the rejects

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[64] Geoffrey Dutton, *The Innovators: the Sydney alternatives in the rise of modern art, literature and ideas*, MacMillan, Melbourne, 1986, p.119.
[65] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 January, 1953.
[66] In a letter to the author dated 10 December, 1991, Jeffrey Smart noted that there was a very fine portrait by Jean Bellette of Russell Drysdale that had been rejected.

John Olsen at the forefront of the Anti-Archibald demonstration,
Sun, 24 January, 1953. Photo: Courtesy of the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

exhibition by the Minister of Education R.J. Heffron. Smart recalls: 'John telephoned me to ask what could they do to help. I said, "Why not demonstrate [with] a long placard, so long that it takes time to read. When Heffron is making his speech...in the middle of it, raise it from hiding." I told them to unfurl it in the crowd, below the knees...It had to be long enough so that Heffron couldn't read it at a glance. They did just as I asked, & Heffron broke down in the middle of the speech. "YOU'LL NEVER GET ANYWHERE BEHAVING LIKE THIS!" he yelled [and] a lot of people wondered what he was going on about. It made headlines'.[67] The banner addressed the issue of the 'Gallery reform promises' and the demonstrators proceeded to hand out leaflets containing the relevant information about the trustees. Despite the irate comments of the Minister that such actions would achieve nothing, a Bill was later introduced limiting the trustees' term to five or seven years.[68]

When the 'French Painting Today' exhibition came to Australia, largely as a result of the assiduous efforts of Hal Missingham with the support of the other State Gallery directors, it was revolutionary in its impact. It was the most significant international show in Australia since the 'French and British Contemporary Art' exhibition of 1939. In addition to well-known names such as Picasso and Matisse, the original work of artists who had established their reputations since the war such as Vieira da Silva, Hans Hartung, Manessier and Soulages became available to many in the country for the first time. For John Olsen and Bill Rose these paintings represented a new spirit of discovery. There was, however, a necessary gestation period for Olsen and it would take another three years before the effects of the exhibition were fully realised in his paintings.

Between 1952 and 1955 John Olsen exhibited works in group exhibitions with the Society of Artists [69] and at Macquarie Galleries which, aside from David Jones and Blaxland Galleries, was the only major commercial gallery. It was run at that time by Lucy Swanton and Treania Smith and had become well known for the 'Shows of Fives' and 'Shows of Sixes', where all works exhibited were on sale for five or six guineas. Donald Friend recreated the atmosphere of the times:

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[67] ibid.

[68] Dutton, op.cit.

[69] These exhibitions were not major in terms of Olsen's artistic development but rather reveal the slow progress noted in this chapter with regard to his painting in these early years. For further specific details see Ian Dungavell, *John Olsen: The You Beaut Years, Paintings 1960-64*, Honours Thesis, Australian National University, 1989.

> The Macquarie did the most for Sydney artists then. Lucy Swanton and Treania Smith were bright but very conservative...they felt that having incomes themselves... money was rather vulgar...
>
> I liked Lucy but she used to condescend to one, and I know it used to send John Olsen round the bend with fury. 'Oh we might be able to fit you into the next five guineas show'...everyone would come down in their Rolls Royces and Daimlers...and meet the students sitting on the doorway stairs...waiting for the door to open in the morning, and snap up the Drysdales and the rest of the real plums, five guineas you know. We all enjoyed it. Maybe it was simply because we were young anyway and didn't know any better. And now there are more galleries than hat shops.[70]

John Olsen had his first significant exhibition at Macquarie Galleries in 1955, at the age of twenty-seven. The show revealed his intensive efforts to assimilate the lessons of the past few years – to develop a sound structural basis and a feeling for the human figure – and to gradually evolve some sense of vitality of his own. The exhibition included twelve moderately scaled works: pastel drawings of still lifes after Degas, figures and landscapes in the manner of Corot, such as *Bush Landscape* , and several oil paintings including *Still Life with Boy* and *Memory of the Wild Colonial Boy*, which were beginning to show evidence of the breakthrough of the *The Bicycle Boys* series the following year.

The title *Memory of the Wild Colonial Boy*, 1954 (pl.5) from the well-known Australian bush ballad, is one of the earliest examples of an attempt by Olsen to refer to the local context.[71] This painting also reveals his interest, developed during that year, in Marino Marini's drawings and *Horse and Rider* sculptures (see fig.10). Despite the strong, structural approach to form, the boy, gaily and dynamically perched on his horse, is the first instance in his painting of the figure being expressively released in space. In another charming, small work, *Bird on Window Sill* (pl.6) Olsen hints at his subsequent interest in irrational imagery, in the quirky bird and delicate chair intercepting the surrounding structural framework.

Paul Haefliger had been following Olsen's progress with interest and wrote a positive review in which he preempted events that would radically affect Olsen's future. 'John Olsen, emerging from the countless ranks of students, is so far the brightest hope for a new generation of painters...His disintegration of forms, his sense of corruption, delightfully daring in works such as "Still Life", "Weaving Loom" and "Still Life with Boy", in which there is already a sense of achievement,

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[70] Dutton, op.cit. p.113.

[71] See *My Country: Australian Poetry and Short Stories*, Volume 1. Selected and with an introduction by Leonie Kramer, Lansdowne Press, Sydney, 1985, p.84.

make him an ideal candidate for a trip abroad.'[72] Not all the reviews were so positive, with other critics commenting on the 'dull satisfaction of worn out themes' and another noting that the standard fell a 'little short of the usual Macquarie standard, even if Olsen's work is very moderately priced'.[73]

Nevertheless, towards the end of 1953, Olsen had gained sufficient confidence to explore a range of options that contradicted, in part, those of his first mentor, Passmore. It was during this period that he attended a ten-week class with Desiderius Orban, who had a rather less disciplinarian-like approach to teaching. In the introduction to Orban's book *Understanding Art* (first published in part as *A Layman's Guide to Creative Art* in 1957) John Olsen wrote that when this Hungarian-born artist and teacher arrived in Australia in the late 1930s, modern art 'was a subject of revolution...He is one of the teachers responsible for the great variety and freedom we now enjoy in modern Australian art'.[74]

The significance of Orban's teaching, for John Olsen, lay in his approach to creativity: 'The creative artist's art is a pulsing, living force and his skill of creation grows equally with his mature mind, but this skill is inseparable from his aim'. Orban encouraged an imaginative approach to the synthesis of the visible world and the 'stirrings of the subjective self'.[75] While in Passmore's classes the dynamism of the figure came through chiaroscuro and the enigma of wanting to discover and disintegrate the figure simultaneously, Orban demonstrated a different approach emerging from his understanding of Matisse: that there was a paring away and spatial distortion of the figure through line, which could be pulled around and extended to admit a feeling of air into the figure. Olsen recalls that Orban also brought an alternative grasp of Cézanne, in which 'one leg can be thicker than the other – a disproportioning of realities' to suit the expressive purposes of the figure.[76]

The real breakthrough in Olsen's figurative works of the 1950s came with *The Bicycle Boys Rejoice* (pl.7) and *The Bicycle Boys* (pl.9) both painted in 1955. They

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[72] Paul Haefliger, 'Big Promise in Work of Painter', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 February 1955.
[73] Daily Mirror (Sydney), February 24, 1955 and James Cook, 'Silence is a Better Way', Daily Telegraph (Sydney), February 16, 1955. Quoted in Ian Dungavell, *John Olsen: The You Beaut Years 1960-1964*, op.cit.
[74] Desiderius Orban, *Understanding Art*, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1968; *A Layman's Guide to Creative Art*, Edwards & Shaw, Sydney, 1957.
[75] ibid.
[76] Close examination of Passmore's paintings also reveals this sense of a 'disproportioning of realities'. This was to become an important aspect of Olsen's own teaching methods as recalled by Peter Powditch in an interview with the author. The latter point is referred to in Chapter 5.

represent the culmination of his early training, as well as his deliberate attempt to break free. John Passmore ceased teaching at the Julian Ashton Art School in mid-1954. During this year Olsen felt an increasingly urgent need to break away from the strong hold that Passmore still had on him. This feeling was shared by his friend, Peter Upward (then also still painting small figurative works and still lifes) with whom he occasionally worked in a studio in Woolloomooloo. 'After this period of severe constrictions', Olsen recalls, 'we were breaking out. There had been a huge amount of "thou shalt nots" and now we could break out. We were free to experiment. We were now in the open world. How were we going to survive?'

They began to do rough improvisations on Cubist faceting of form, and increasingly looked towards Keith Vaughan and Marino Marini from illustrations in books, and magazines such as *Studio*. Olsen was also becoming fascinated with Romanesque art – with the flattening out of space, the distortion of figures and the sense of the irrational in the imagery.

John Olsen's drive towards freedom and experimentation is revealed in a few rapid studies on the theme of boys and bicycles (figs.11 and 12). In the first, the gouache line follows and connects the shapes of the two sets of bicycle wheels, from which basic shapes of the figures extend. There is a process of extending and reducing in which the more broadly brushed areas simultaneously spill out from the edge and are held back by line. The second shows a fantastically free, fly-away lyricism, as fleeting, fragmented little lines and marks expressively suggest the two merging figures propelled forward by the implied movement of the bicycle.

In an interview with James Gleeson, Olsen commented that the idea for *The Bicycle Boys* series was also based on his impressions of the cyclists he saw on his visits to Centennial Park in Sydney:

> I used to go down to Centennial Park. They had a lot of bicycles and I was rather fascinated by the difference in human body weight and the lightness of the bicycle. It had a kind of airiness about it. They used to sort of ride up and down hills and in the final moments of the race, which was often twenty miles long, the winner would arrive. And they would be absolutely exhausted...first and second...and they used to embrace each other. Still there was the balance thing... I guess it stands as a disparity of the airiness of human rejoicing, with the perilousness of the bicycle shapes themselves.[77]

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[77] John Olsen, interview with James Gleeson, National Gallery of Australia library, Canberra, 9 April, 1979.

The outstanding early work is *The Bicycle Boys Rejoice* (pl.7), 1955, where these moments of rejoicing are captured in the expressive gestures of the figures rising up from their rickety bicycles, against the background of broadly applied creamy pinks and greys. Through the extension of line and the disintegration and repetition of forms, John Olsen creates a feeling of vitality and pathos. There is an irrational, Chaplinesque quality, heightened by elements such as the quirky little umbrella-like bicycle bell, the steps within the adjoining wheel and the empty front wheel attached to the curling handle. The linear emphasis, the emotional sensibility and the sense of irrationality in this painting represent the signposts towards the distinctive means of expression for which he would become best known.

The Bicycle Boys (pl.9) (also titled *Signor Coppi – Winner* when it was included in the Italian Painting competition in 1956) was painted in Melbourne, based in part on memories of the cyclists in Centennial Park. It is more vibrant in colour, more complex in structure and also more openly eclectic than its predecessor. The strength of the work lies in the emotive impact of bright hues, as well as in the play of unity, duality and repetition in the boys, the bicycle and the light fittings. Close observation reveals Olsen's capacity for invention in the way he resolves spatial and gestural considerations simultaneously by completing the circle of the back bicycle wheel with the boy's balletic leg.

The paired figures recur in the poetic, gentle penumbra of *The Rabitters* (pl.10) one of the earliest instances where human forms are intimately related to the natural world. The spiky, linear brushmarks of the plant forms (reminiscent of Graham Sutherland's paintings) interconnect and become part of the figures. The attempt to convey in paint a deeply felt belief in the underlying unity of all living things was to become one of the pivotal aspects of Olsen's work. Keith Vaughan wrote that the aim of the artist is to paint a picture which is 'a mirror to one's innermost soul'. 'The problem always remained the same – to put it in technical terms it is to find the form which at one and the same time describes the essential reality of the thing... and also fulfils its function as a unit in the construction of the painting'.[78] Vaughan wanted to merge the figures with the landscape without destroying their separate identities, and could have been writing about Olsen's work when he noted:

> It is this tenseness and wholeness I want to express in my painting: the absolute harmony which results from the simultaneous

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[78] Keith Vaughan, 'Statements on Painting', written in 1951, published in the British art journal, *Modern Painters*, vol 3, no.2, 1990, pp. 42-43.

> interdependence and antagonism of objects of different natures; the stability which results from the perfect balance of movement.[79]

The Bicycle Boys and *The Rabbiters* were both painted in Melbourne, where John Olsen and his family moved to live in April 1955. He had initially visited this city (probably in the previous year) when he hitchhiked there with Peter Upward. He had been impressed by the collection at the National Gallery of Victoria, which he now hoped to study more closely. Although the impression has often been created of an antipathy between Melbourne and Sydney artists in the mid to late 1950s – between figuration in the former and abstraction in the latter – neither is wholly correct. From 1955, Olsen, Upward and others made close friendships with Melbourne artists that were sustained over many years.

In Melbourne Olsen met, among others, John Perceval, Arthur Boyd, Charles Blackman and Clifton Pugh, who were working in a predominantly figurative way; and Len French, John Howley, Donald Laycock and Lawrence Daws, whose paintings revealed more of an abstract conception. It was not a simple dichotomy, particularly in the work of the latter group, because the boundaries between abstraction and figuration were fluid and malleable. John Olsen later provided insights into the mix of ideas exemplified the 'Group of Four' - Pugh, Laycock, Howley and Daws - who exhibited together in 1955 and 1956.

> The four, of course were even then very different. They symbolized, however, in small parcels, what were to be the barricades of art in the 1950s. Pugh the Antipodean, Daws succouring an abstract symbolist landscape, Laycock developing a very interesting personal totem and Howley measuring the perimeters of lyrical abstraction.[80]

Clifton Pugh recalled that he and Olsen, who were the younger generation on the brink of making their reputations, would often meet with other artists and exchange ideas. As in Sydney, artists shared an intense commitment to art, at a time when being an artist was still largely considered to be 'on the outside of society'. 'None of us ever had any money – the women helped to support us...We all knew each other; there were so few of us in those days and there wasn't much competition because there wasn't much to compete for.'[81] The meeting places for artists again centred around coffee shops, pubs and restaurants. Olsen recalls first meeting John Howley

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[79] ibid.
[80] John Olsen, 'John Howley', *Art and Australia*, vol. 8, no.4, 1971, p.333.
[81] Clifton Pugh, interview with the author.

at the Swanston Family Hotel, 'a pub where artists, intellectuals and bon-vivants used to gather, sometimes euphemistically called (in those days) Len French's University'.[82]

The most important rendezvous for the art and literary world in Melbourne was Mirka's coffee shop in Exhibition Street, run by Mirka and Georges Mora. Both the Moras were lively and committed protagonists for contemporary art in Melbourne and the coffee shop was also the meeting place for the Contemporary Art Society. There were always paintings on the walls and Olsen recalls seeing works by Charles Blackman and Arthur Boyd there, as well as John Perceval's ceramics. He was also attracted to the Mora's European panache. 'It was there I had my first onion soup... it was a miracle.' Mirka Mora, herself a vivacious personality, in turn recalls Olsen as exuberant and stimulating company, capable of engendering an atmosphere of great excitement.[83]

John Olsen was living with his family in an old house in Toorak that had been converted into eight apartments. His wife Mary was working as a teacher, and in 1956 Olsen worked as an art master at Moreland High School. Apart from *The Bicycle Boys* and *The Rabbiters*, he recalls painting very little in Melbourne. In March 1956 he exhibited a work in the 'Herald Outdoor Art Exhibition' (a work previously shown in Mirka's coffee shop) listed in the catalogue simply as 'Painting – Oil – 50 guineas', later titled *Sydney Waterfront* .[84] It was purchased from the show by the National Gallery of Victoria – the first work by Olsen to enter a State Gallery collection.

Eric Westbrook, then Director of the National Gallery of Victoria, announced the purchase of the work by Olsen (as well as a painting by Kenneth Hood from the same exhibition), in the Melbourne *Age* on 14 March 1956. He said that he wanted to build up the collection of Australian art and support promising emerging talent. 'I wouldn't say either of these works is a masterpiece...but they are sensitive, intelligent pieces of art – what more could one want?' The article concluded:

> Both Hood and Olsen are 28 and they're good friends...'I think they've overpaid me for it', modestly remarked Olsen when told of

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[82] John Olsen, *Art and Australia*, op.cit., p.333.

[83] Mirka Mora, interview with the author.

[84] Even at this early stage John Olsen's work was having an impact on other artists. William Delafield Cook, in an interview with the author, recalled seeing Olsen's painting in 'The Herald Outdoor Art Exhibition' and finding it inspirational.

the news, 'but there is no greater break than to have your work hung in the Gallery. I'm delighted'.

Unfortunately this work was subsequently destroyed in a fire and the only remaining evidence is a small black and white reproduction from the Herald exhibition catalogue. The most obvious development revealed from this limited perspective is the way in which the constructive elements in the earlier Melbourne paintings – the spiky forms on the lower left of *The Rabbiters* and the small blocks of colour in the same location in *The Bicycle Boys* – began to assume a greater significance in the overall composition of the later work. A caption in the catalogue reads: 'John Olsen's semi-abstraction with scaffoldings in the foreground (cat. No. 933) is an interesting essay in freely arranged shapes and colours. The geometric approach characteristic of most abstract painters is here replaced with a much more vigorous and exhilarating form of expression'.

On the whole, however, this Melbourne visit represented a period of uncertainty for Olsen, both in his work and personal life. The obvious linking factor between some of the Melbourne and Sydney artists came through the impact made by the 'French Painting Today' exhibition in 1953 and the 'Italian Art of the Twentieth Century' exhibition in 1956, with the latter being more relevant to Melbourne artists. However the major developments in Olsen's paintings did not manifest themselves until his return to Sydney. Olsen and his wife, Mary, had been experiencing difficulties in their marriage and he decided to move back to Sydney on his own in August 1956. It was in effect to be the end of their relationship.[85]

On his return, Olsen moved into an apartment in Victoria Street, Kings Cross, in a building where his friends Bill Rose and Russell Drysdale were living. During the next few months he immersed himself in his work and renewed the debates with his friends about art, philosophy and new directions.

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[85] This was a difficult subject to discuss as John Olsen and Mary McNish had their distinctive memories of events that had happened nearly four decades ago. While Mary still felt anger about the situation and John expressed regret and pain at departing from his daughter, neither was keen to make the details of their personal lives public in this regard. See notes in the introductory chapter of this thesis regarding the process of writing an art monograph as opposed to a biography.

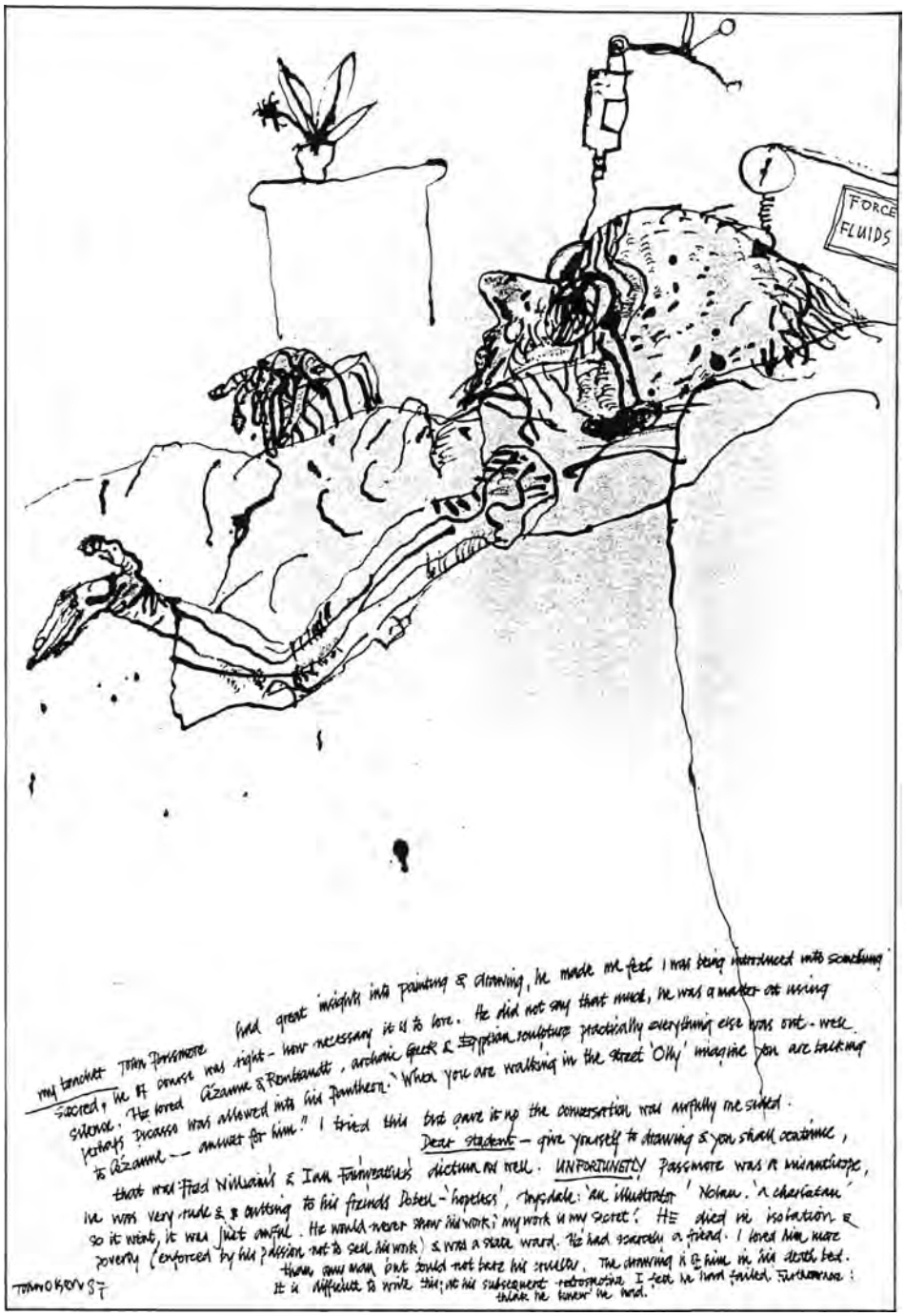


fig.3 *John Passmore* 1987, pen and ink, watercolour on paper, 75.4 x 54cm
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

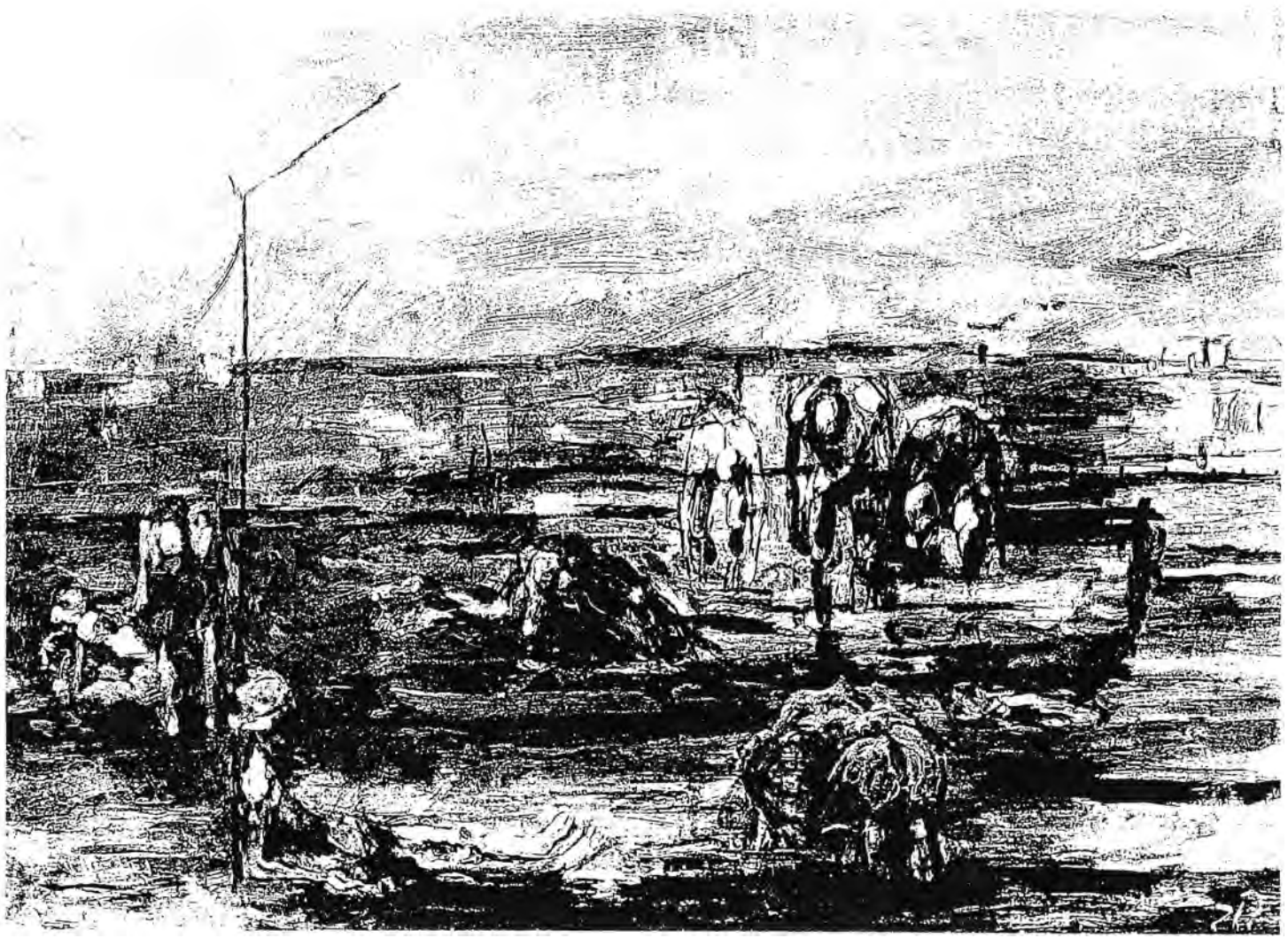


fig.4 John Passmore, *Harbourside* 1952, oil on hardboard, 61 x 81.5cm. Collection: National Gallery of Victoria.

fig.5 Demonstration drawings from John Olsen's 1976 notebook recalling his drawing classes with John Passmore at the Julian Ashton Art School

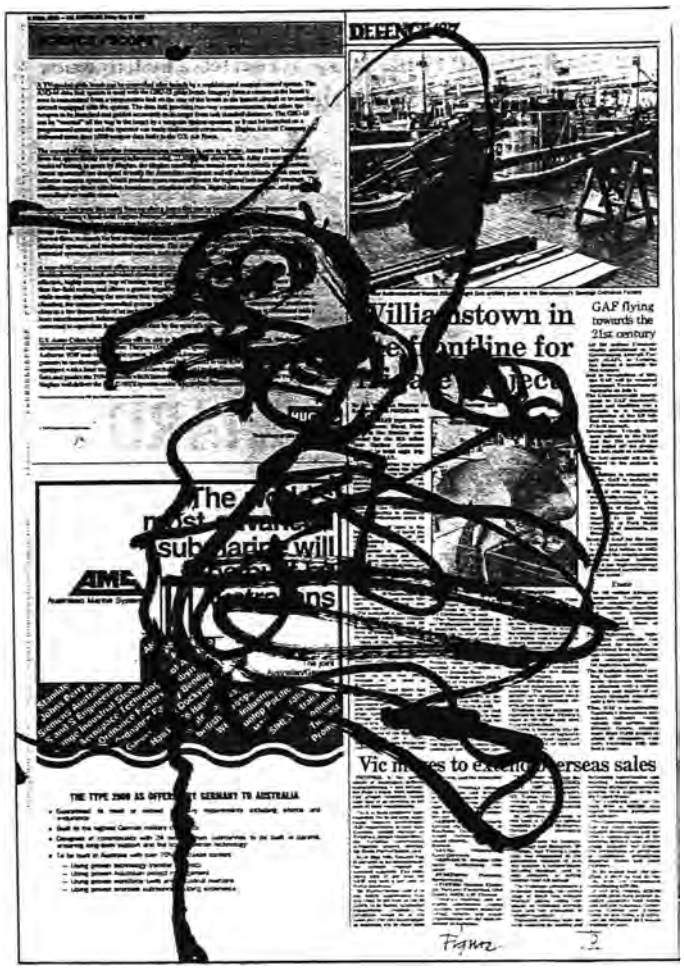


fig.6 *Figure* 1987, enamel on newspaper, 60x 42cm
Private collection

fig. 7 *Man and Dog* 1987, enamel on newspaper, 60 x 42cm
Private Collection

fig. 8 *The Sea of Galilee* 1954, oil on canvas, 72 x 93cm
Private collection

fig.9 *Mary bathing Jane* 1953, pastel on paper on board, 19.5 x 21.5cm
Private collection

fig.10 Marino Marini
Horse and Rider, 1949-50, bronze
The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, USA

fig.11 *The Bicycle Boy* (study), c.1954-55, ink and wash on paper, 33.5 x 37.7cm
Collection: Ray and Annette Hughes

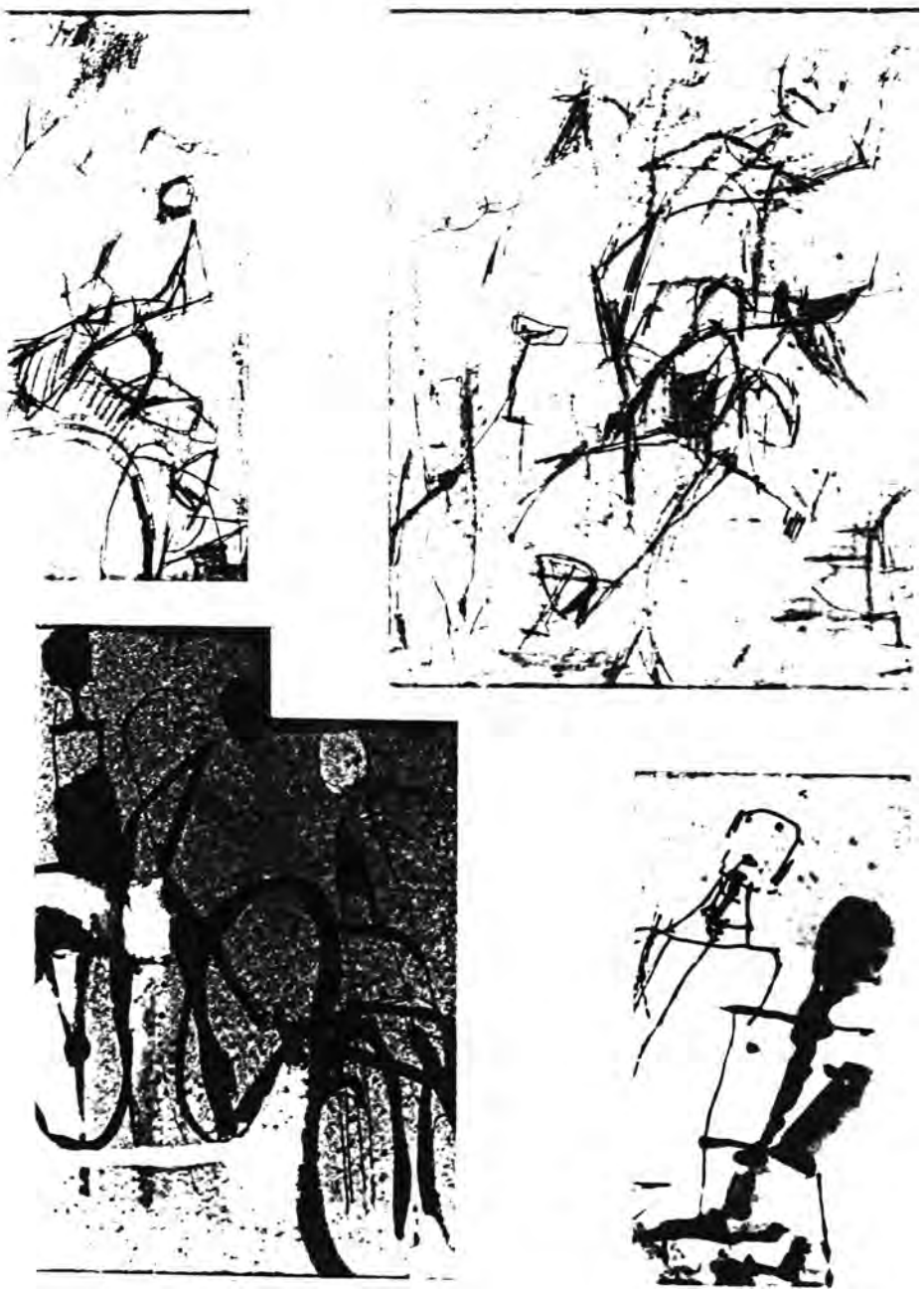
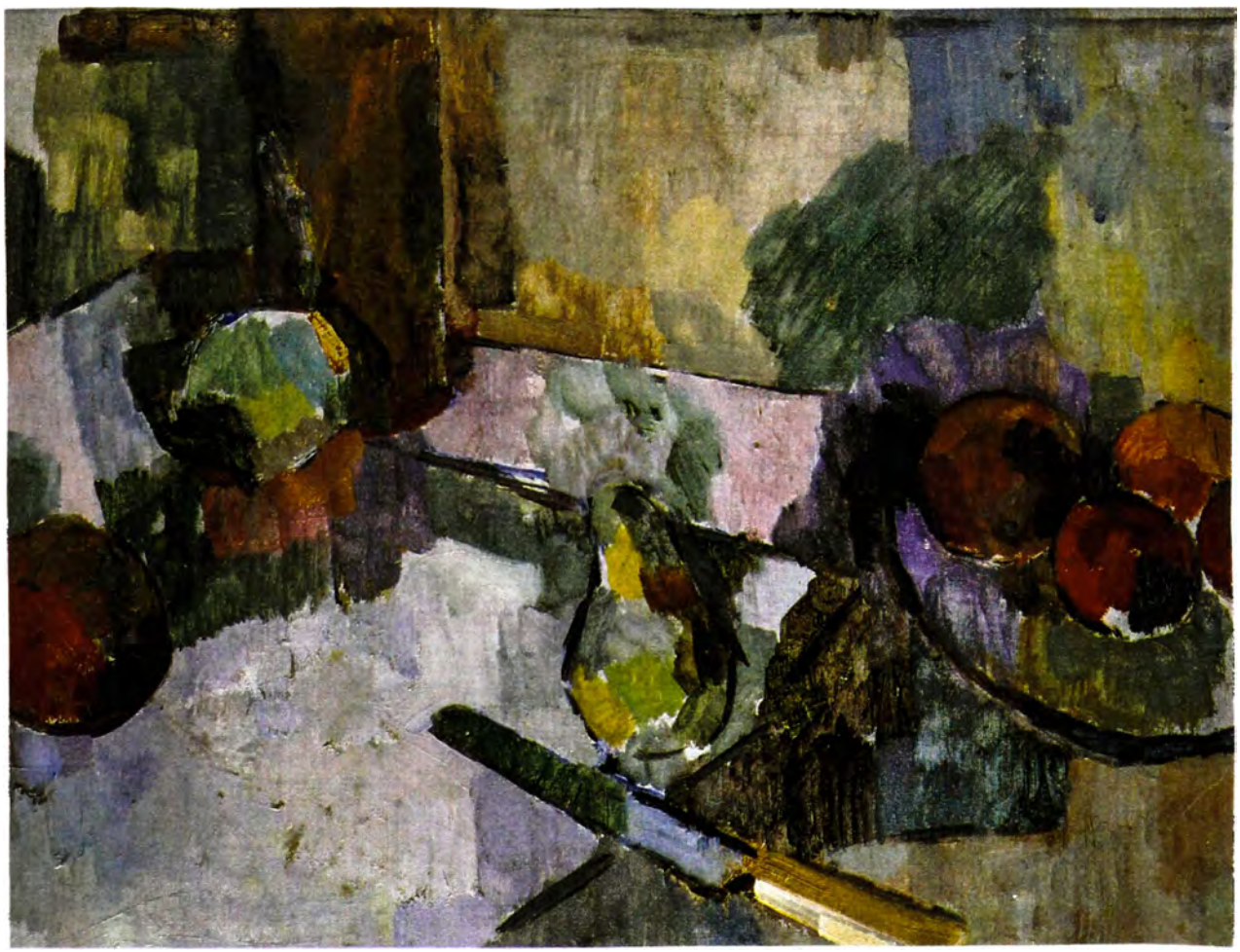
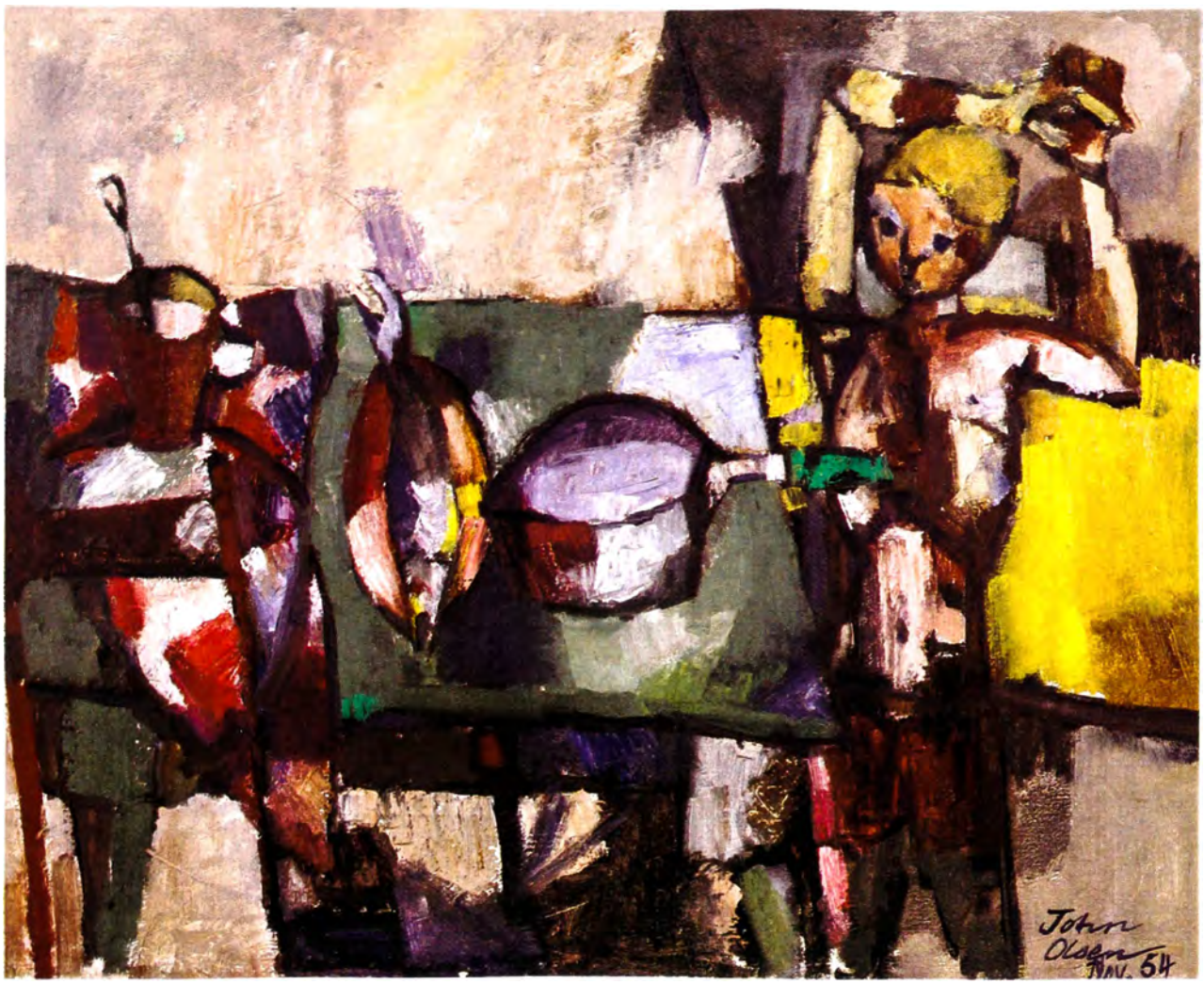


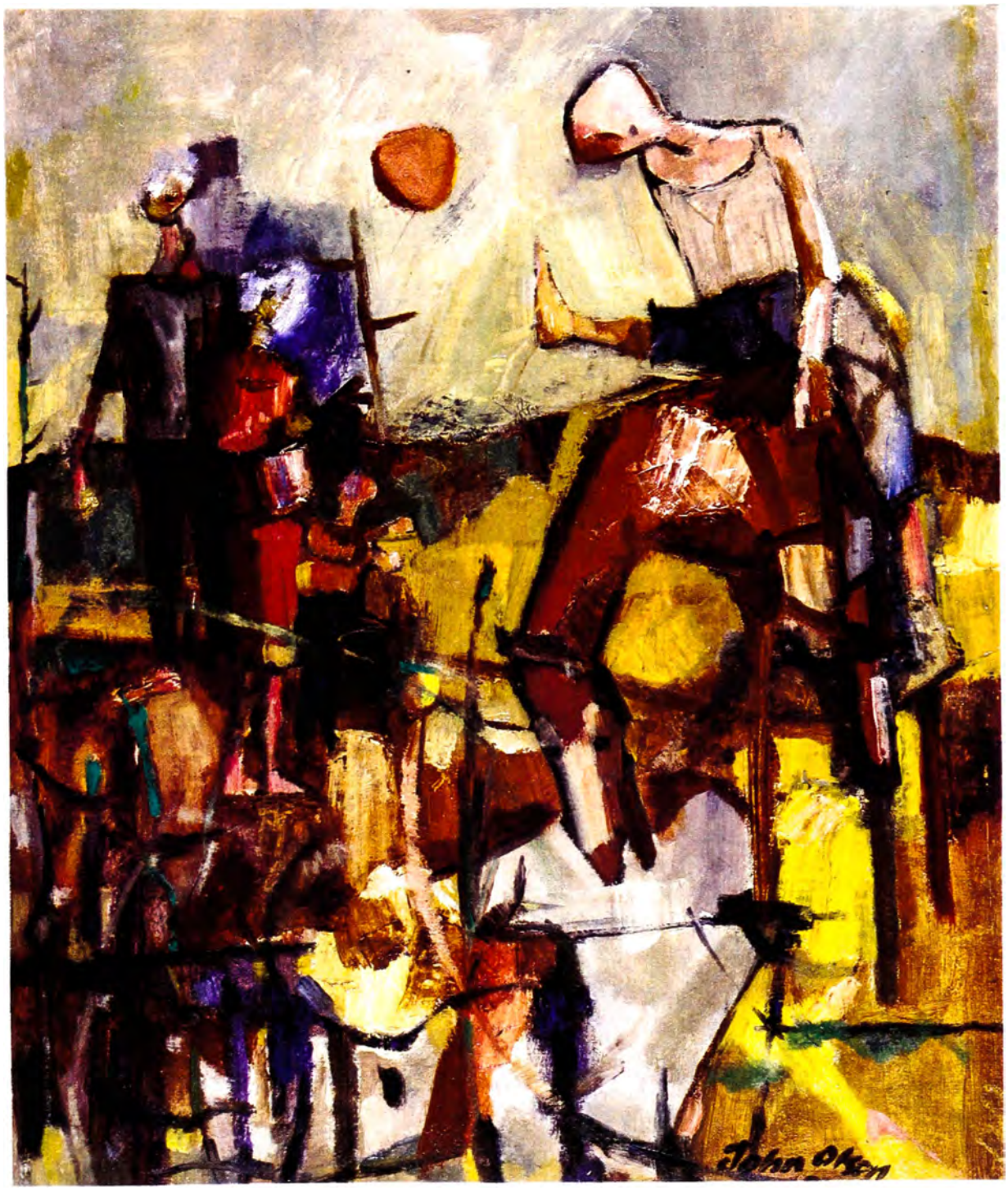
fig. 12 Preliminary sketches for *The Bicycle Boys* series, c.1954-55,
pencil and gouache on paper,
variable dimensions
Private collection



pl.3 *Still Life* c.1951 oil on board, 40 x 51cm
Collection of the artist

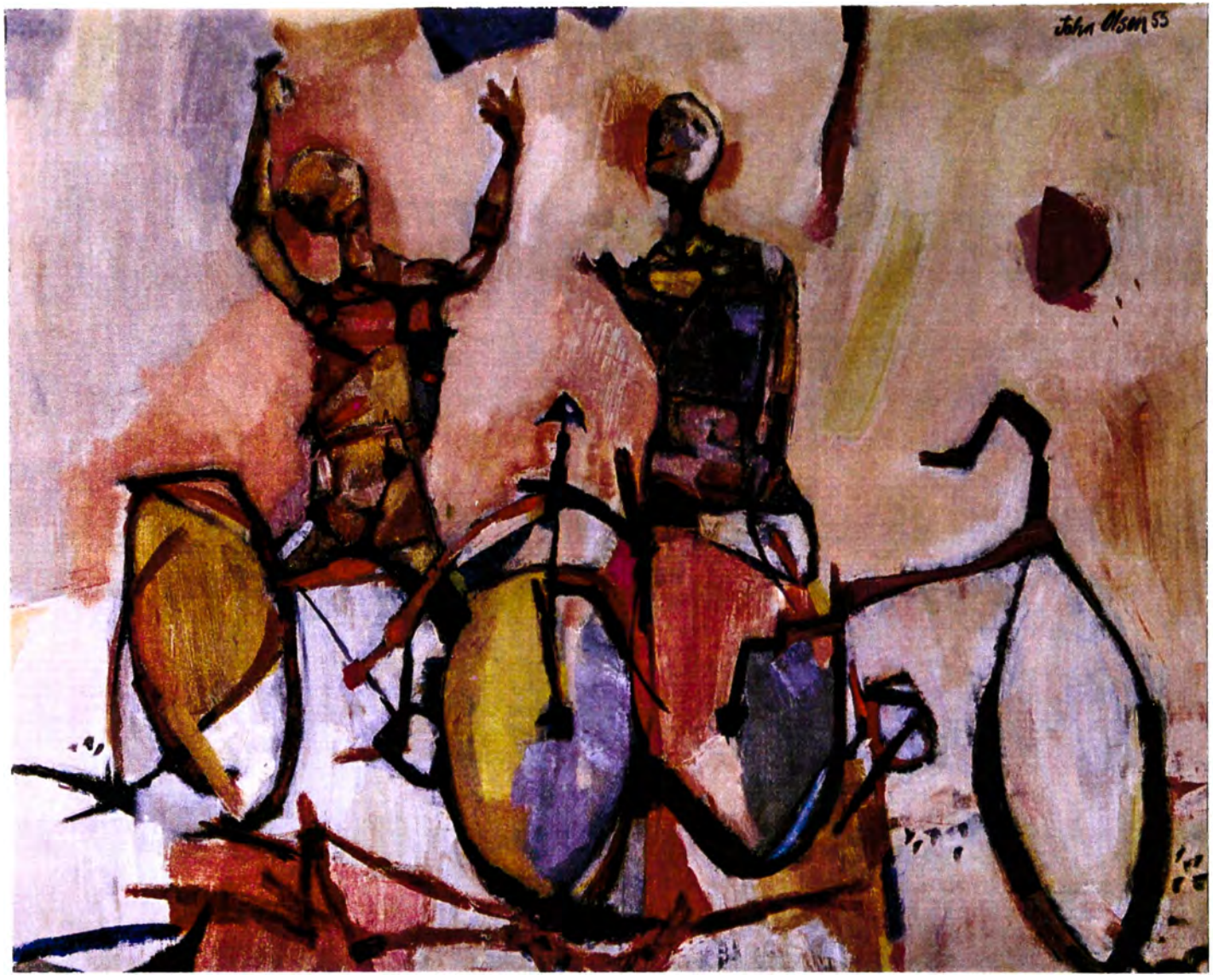


pl.4 *Still Life with boy* 1954, oil on board, 60.5 x 75.2cm
Collection: Newcastle Region Art Gallery. Gift of Miss Lucy Swanton



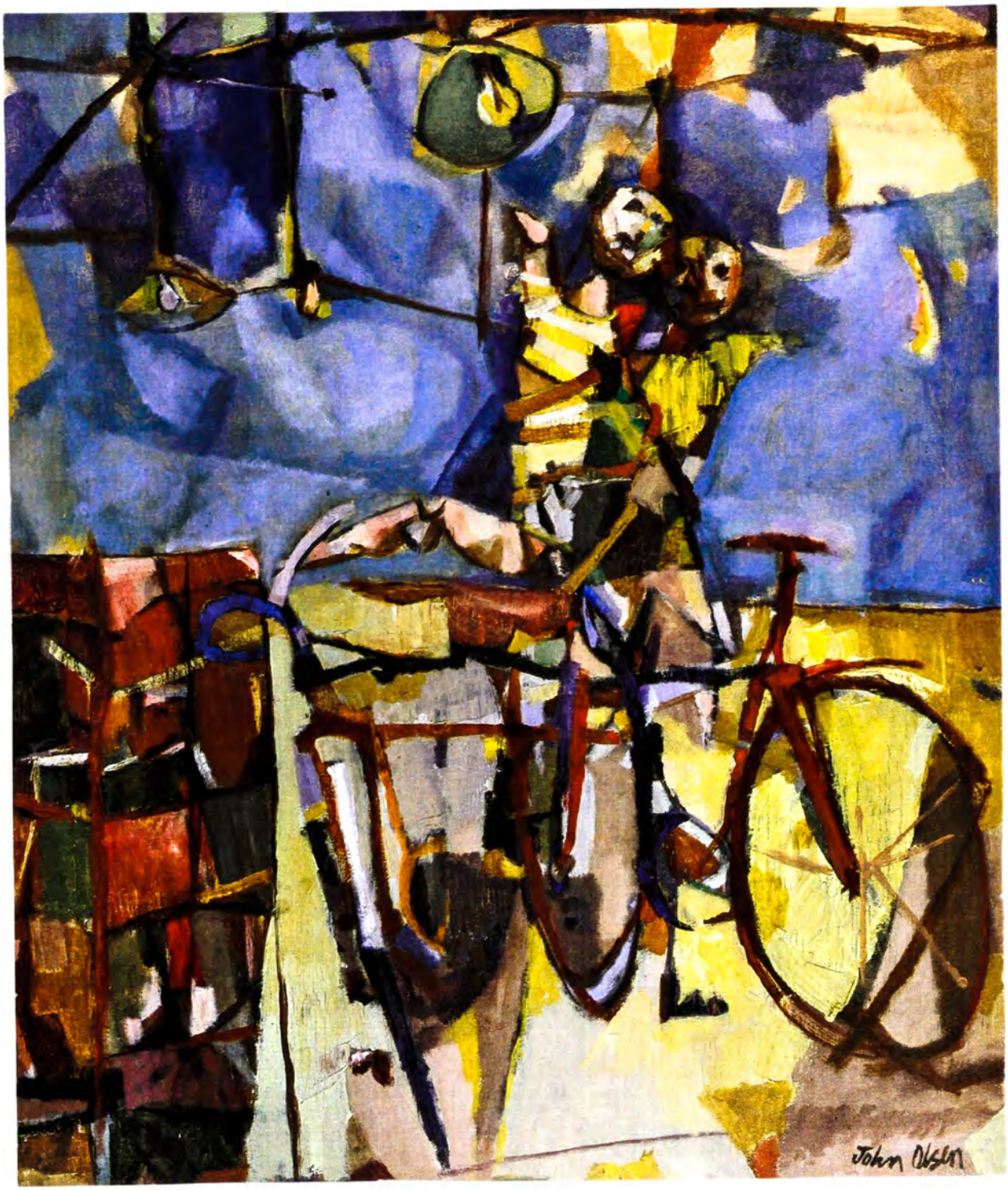
pl.5 *Memory of the Wild Colonial Boy* 1954, oil on canvas, 62 x 51.5cm
Private collection

pl.6 *Bird on Window Sill* 1955, oil on board, 22 x 29cm
Collection: City of Horsham Regional Art Gallery

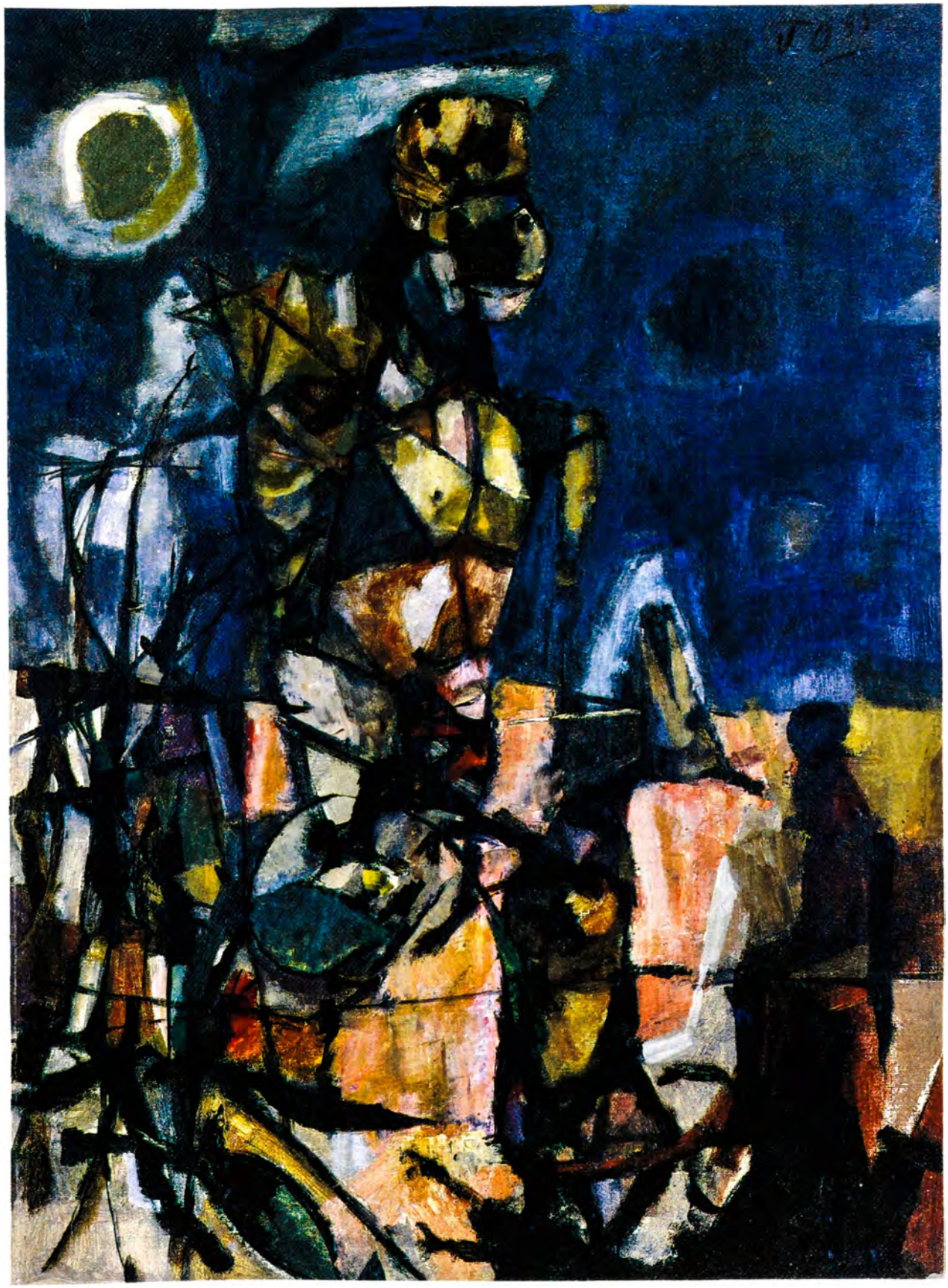


pl.7 *The Bicycle Boys Rejoice* 1955, oil on canvas, 59.7 x 79.4cm. Collection: James Fairfax

pl.8 *Head of a boy* 1955, oil on board, 55.6 x 42.4cm
Collection of the artist



pl.9 *The Bicycle Boys* 1955, oil on canvas, 92.5 x 77.2cm
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra



pl.10 *The Rabitters* 1955, oil on board, 76.5 x 57cm
Collection of the artist

CHAPTER 3

THE PACIFIC LOAN EXHIBITION AND DIRECTION 1

> *Art does not reproduce the visible, rather it makes visible...Today we reveal the reality that is behind visible things, thus expressing the belief that the visible world is merely an isolated case in relation to the universe, and that there are many...other, latent realities.* [86]

The period between August and December 1956 was characterised by intensive activity and stimulating discussions between John Olsen and his friends, particularly Bill Rose, Robert Klippel and John Passmore. The events that occurred and the exchange of ideas culminated in the 'Direction 1' exhibition at the end of the year. This show, which lasted only one week and was a financial failure, managed to generate considerable excitement, misinformation and shaped in part the way in which Australian art history would be told.

The crucial lead up to 'Direction 1' was the 'Pacific Loan Exhibition: Contemporary Australian Painting'.[87] Olsen's works in both exhibitions represent a significant but transitional phase in his artistic development. The most striking characteristics of these works are the move away from the obvious figuration of the previous year, towards a generally more abstract *conception*: loosely geometric frameworks and a further flattening out of space. While never wanting to paint purely abstract works, Olsen was attempting to penetrate beyond the wholly external world of perceived realities, or as Paul Klee put it, to make the invisible visible.

When the 'French Painting Today' exhibition arrived in Australia in 1953, John Olsen was still in the very early stages of his development and it took another three years before he was able to assimilate, filter and apply with assurance, aspects of what he had seen and been stimulated by, into his *View of the Western World* series. Olsen was particularly interested in artists who belonged to the School of Paris like Maria Vieira da Silva, André Marchand, Hans Hartung and Alfred Manessier, but apart from the impact of these individual artists, the exhibition as a whole provided a challenge to reactionary attitudes. Bearing in mind the Archibald fracas the year before and the antagonism to modernism among some of the trustees,

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[86] Will Grohman, *Paul Klee*, Harry N. Abrahams, New York (n.d.), p.21.

[87] Note that this is the full title of the exhibition. For the sake of brevity it is referred to elsewhere in this chapter as The Pacific Loan Exhibition.

the enthusiastic response of so many of the artists was also a tribute to the achievement of Hal Missingham, who played a decisive role in its inception.

For the younger generation of artists like Olsen and Bill Rose this was the first major international exhibition of contemporary art they had seen. It provided them with a sense of the validity of their own experiences in front of the works themselves; it suggested at once an extension of the past and the challenge of a new beginning. Olsen wrote, 'Here for the first time were pictures of the French masters in the original, we were all very excited about it, but looking back it represented much more than just pictures - it represented a spirit of optimism that anything could happen'.[88] Bill Rose recalls that these attitudes were very much a part of their lively discussions in Victoria Street in 1956, 'At that time there was a form of maturity hitting us, where your art had to have authenticity. We'd lost our artistic virginity and there was that form of emancipation of the thing itself'.[89]

Olsen's paintings in the *View of the Western World* series were evidence of his growing technical assuredness. *View of the Western World No.1* (pl.11) was initially based on the cranes and structures in the Garden Island Dockyard which he looked down upon on a grey, rainy day from the vantage point of Victoria Street. The paint surface is built up of overlapping square and rectangular brushmarks, gradually evolving a constructive framework of shifting, muted grey-greens, slaty blues, rusty ochre and white, held in check by darker vertical and horizontal lines of greater and lesser densities.

After leaving art school Olsen had been deeply impressed by Werner Haftman's book on Paul Klee. 'We read Haftman's book until our eyes dropped out; it was like a bible.' Klee's magic square paintings and his ideas related to self-realisation through 'constructive figuration' provide some parallels with Olsen's aims at the time. In the development of pictorial structure and meaning, Klee perceived that the study of tonal values in nature, led of its own accord to a constructive figuration 'as one layer of grey, getting gradually darker, was superimposed on another until maximum depth was attained...The picture grew genetically from layer to layer within the dark-light relationship'.[90] For Klee, the construction of a purely formal

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[88]Barry Pearce, 'Direction 1', *Art and Australia*, vol.24, no.4, 1987, p.503 Letter from John Olsen to Pearce, 21 August, 1981.
[89]Bill Rose, interview with the author.
[90]Werner Haftman, *The Mind and Work of Paul Klee*, Faber, London, 1954, p.42.

entity was not an end in itself, but rather, a means of bringing him back to what he described as the 'original province of psychic imagination'.[91]

In *View of the Western World No. 3* (pl.12) lines gather and splinter across the canvas in alternating shifts of tension and relaxation; the dramatic contrast of black against white is interspersed by tiny patches of pure, vibrant colour. It is the closest of the series to the works of Vieira da Silva, who had been greatly inspired by Paul Klee and was, herself, an artist capable of great strength and delicacy of touch.[92] Like many of her generation, she abstracted from reality. The starting point was often cityscapes - transformed into graphic structures, bold perspectives and giddying vanishing points (fig.13). For Olsen these works seemed to represent 'a natural progression from the Cézanne-like touches to a world less possessed by objectivity, more ethereal and more spiritual'.[93]

In October 1956 *View of the Western World No.3* was purchased by the Art Gallery of Western Australia. The Director, Laurie Thomas, wrote in a letter to Olsen:

> I am very glad indeed to be able to tell you that my Trustees, at their meeting on Friday, 12th October, agreed to purchase...your oil, View of the Western World (100 gns)...
>
> ...I regard it as one of the best abstract paintings ever made in this country and it was easily the best of all the paintings which I collected on this visit to other states. It will be a magnificent addition to our collection.[94]

View of the Western World No.3 (pl.12) and Bill Rose's *No.18* (both included in the 'Pacific Loan Exhibition') reveal a strong structural emphasis. Both artists wanted to break with what they perceived to be the existing boundaries of the art world in Australia, and had been inspired by the French Painting exhibition, Vieira da Silva and philosophical ideas. However, their paintings also reveal important differences: Rose in the delicate lines and myriad of minute reverberating squares, has constructed a finely tuned, precise architectonic whole; Olsen by comparison is, even in this broadly geometric work more expressive in the application of brushmarks than his friend. Referring to the photograph taken on the day that their works were collected for the 'Pacific Loan Exhibition', Bill Rose said:

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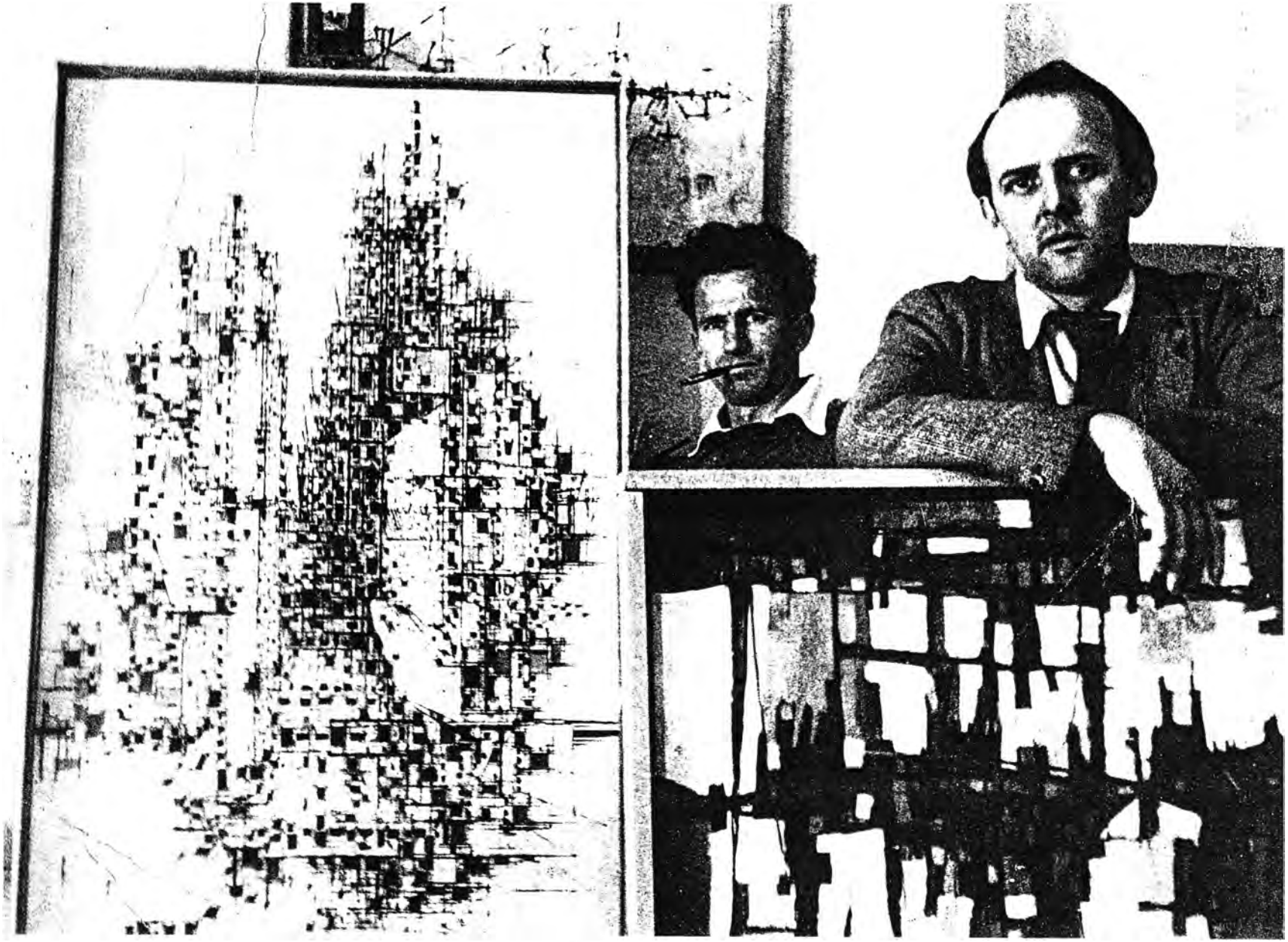
[91] ibid., pp. 42, 43.
[92] Bernard Dorival, *The School of Paris in the Musée d'Art Moderne*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1962, p.240.
[93] Pearce, op.cit., pp.503, 504.
[94] Letter from Laurie Thomas to John Olsen, 16 October, 1956, discovered by the author while undertaking research at the Art Gallery of Western Australia.



Bill Rose and John Olsen with their works included in the 'Pacific Loan Exhibition: Contemporary Australian Painting' 1956

> Put the two pictures together, (they are) like chalk and cheese: totally different worlds - I'm the second youngest in a family of eight; poor Olsen had his old dad to contend with and the tragedy of losing a wife and daughter...[95] There was that period when you felt, 'you never know but something could really happen'...The atmosphere was not so much defiance, but 'who are we?' We are certainly not the sons of our fathers...
>
> Hanne Fairfax, Mervyn Horton and James Gleeson (came along); John and I walked out onto the balcony to let them look at the paintings...they said 'Well of course'. There was a truck downstairs and that was it. We were sending our works off into an unknown world, a world filled with hope, detached from the institution of Australian art. The whole idea was to produce something; bend light, bend the lot.[96]

In the works of this period, John Olsen was faced with the dichotomy of not wanting to lose the subject entirely, while at the same time aiming to go beyond the perceived, external world, to attain a more mystical understanding. The 'Pacific Loan Exhibition' and the 'Direction 1' works have been described as revealing a personal sense of place, Sydney. However, compared with his works relating to the city of the following decade they are less emotive, more impersonal. As the title, *View of the Western World* suggests, they were also partly motivated by a desire to transcend the specificities of place. The idea emerged out of his earlier discussions with Klippel about philosophy, 'albeit the perennial philosopher, Aldous Huxley',[97] comparative religion through writers like Krishnamurti and T.S. Eliot.

As noted in the previous chapter, Olsen had been impressed by Eliot's 'Tradition and the individual talent' (introduced to him by Passmore) which encouraged a sense of impersonality. Eliot was himself deeply interested in different belief systems: in Buddhism and the transcendental.[98]

The search for a spiritual dimension in John Olsen's art came through his discussions with other artists and his reading. He wanted to find a means of expression that was capable of bridging the gap between the outside world and the

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[95] Bill Rose recalled, in an interview with the author, the sense of anguish that Olsen felt at the loss of his family but this was felt to be too personal for the author to include in the monograph.
[96] Bill Rose, interview with the author, 1990.
[97] Olsen, interview with the author, 1989.
[98] Peter Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot*, Penguin, 1988, p.107. In an interview with the author, John Olsen noted that the sense of 'impersonality' later found a correspondence with his own interest in Oriental art and philosophy.

inner-most self, in order to attain a more universal understanding. In the 'Pacific Loan Exhibition' catalogue he commented:

> My painting takes on its particular abstract quality because it is only in this way that I can express my search for direct mystical experience. There is the feeling of the abyss and a void between oneself and everything outside, and one has the impulse to bridge it. The thing I always endeavour to express is an animistic quality - a certain mystical throbbing throughout nature.

This mystical *throbbing* in nature, also related to other sources of inspiration. Olsen had been reading Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, a pioneering document in the movement to free art from its traditional bonds to material reality. Kandinsky's views about a spiritual revolution, were largely inspired by a rejection of conventional religious institutions in favour of a broader, theosophical approach. The central tenet was the 'inner necessity' of art: 'The inner need is the basic alike of small and great problems in painting. We are seeking today for the road which is to lead us away from the outer to the inner basis'.[99]

Olsen engaged in excited conversations with John Passmore about the revolutionary possibilities he had discovered through the 'French Painting Today' exhibition and his reading. He perceived a new way of thinking about pictorial structure and a reduced dependence on external reality, in order to liberate the inner spirit. Passmore responded enthusiastically, 'Olsen was tenacious and a very good thinker...he said a completely new way of seeing things has taken over. What one does is a painting. It is not nature at all. He seized on that...I had my own way and Olsen's new way and for a while they did get mixed up with one another'.[100] Passmore's comments in the 'Pacific Loan Exhibition' catalogue sum up his feelings: 'I don't know - everything is in the melting pot. *Tantot libre, tantot rechercher.*'

By the time the exhibition came together a number of other Sydney artists were also moving towards abstraction in their art, albeit in rather different ways. Elwyn Lynn had become the editor of the *Contemporary Art Society Broadsheet* in 1955, which he developed as a forum for reviving an interest in international art. Prior to 1956

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[99] Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Dover Publications, New York, 1977. Kandinsky was greatly influenced by Mme. Blavatsky and the theosophical society, see p.13. Bernard Smith has written an interesting article on the development of abstraction in Australia in relation to the decline of conventional Christianity: 'Notes on Abstract Art', *The Death of the Artist as Hero*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988, pp.181 - 193.

[100] Barry Pearce, *John Passmore 1904 - 1984*, Retrospective exhibition catalogue, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1985, p.17.

nearly all the works in the Contemporary Art Society exhibitions had been figurative but by the time of their exhibition in October of that year, a considerable number of the exhibits were abstract.[101]

'The Pacific Loan Exhibition: Contemporary Australian Painting', exhibited on board the Orient Line *S.S.Orcades*, was arranged by the Orient Line in collaboration with the National Gallery Society of New South Wales. James Gleeson, artist, critic and lecturer, accompanied the show, which commenced in Sydney on October 2 1956 and then travelled to Auckland, Honolulu, Vancouver and San Francisco and back to Sydney in November 1956. It was the largest Australian exhibition to travel abroad since the Jubilee Exhibition of 1951; although unlike the latter which attempted to survey Australian art history from the colonial period, the 'Pacific Loan Exhibition' concentrated on paintings from the 1940s and 1950s. Gleeson wrote in the catalogue introduction:

> One group calls upon the past, not in a spirit of imitation, but in order to take from it those vital elements that can be adapted to the needs of our time. Changed and altered, these qualities form a link with past traditions while serving as a scaffolding for new ideas.
>
> The second type of artist breaks almost completely with the past and seeks to devise an entirely new language of his own. They are explorers investigating an unknown land.

The Melbourne contingent of the 'Pacific Loan Exhibition', such as Daws, Howley and Laycock, reveal some broad similarities with their Sydney counterparts. However they were closer to the Italian Futurists; to the concepts of the dynamism of city life and the rapid multiplication and diffraction of forms. The titles of their works bear this out: Daws, *Forces of a City No.4*, Howley's *City Force* and Laycock's *Iridescent City*. Furthermore a comparison of Olsen's work *View of the Western World No.2* and Daws' *Forces of a City 4*, both illustrated in the catalogue, demonstrate this point quite clearly.[102] John Olsen's work is evidently closer to the School of Paris in its painterly constructive elements.

Despite some initial hesitancy about how the exhibition would be received overseas, Paul Haefliger, wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'This is Australian art of our

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[101] See also Virginia Spate, *John Olsen*, Georgian House, 1963.

[102] Olsen does not recall seeing the 'Italian Art of the Twentieth Century' exhibition. Certainly it would appear from numerous interviews and other documentation that the Sydney artists' discussions focused on the 'French Painting Today' exhibition. The difference in emphasis between Melbourne and Sydney artists at this time is further highlighted in their comments in the 'Pacific Loan Exhibition' catalogue.

time. One must emphasize this point since it is only the second time that one has been able to assess our painters collectively'. He continued:

> The most exciting aspect here is the revolution which has taken place among a section of painters who have suddenly become aware of the postwar world. Painters with diverging interests suddenly cast aside their former manner of expression and so to speak, jumped into the maelstrom of abstract expressionism...
>
> John Olsen, John Passmore, William Rose and Eric Smith are the leaders of this group, although Passmore and Smith have not yet realised the full potentialities of their new idea...Olsen and Rose come to this art form with some freshness of mind, practically as students into their first adventure...Olsen's 'View of the Western World 1' may show his interest in such painters as Soulages and Hartung, but since his painting generates considerable force one may merely regard these influences as points of departure.[103]

While there is some truth in the last statement, clearly none of the group referred to as the 'leaders of abstract expressionism', had any real interest in or understanding of this movement. Elwyn Lynn began using the term in the March issue of the *Contemporary Art Society Broadsheet* in 1956, but as Lynn himself later wrote, this had no real bearing on what the artists in question were doing.[104] Part of the problem was that the critical vocabulary to deal with abstract art was not yet sufficiently developed in Sydney in 1956. While Haefliger makes the valid connection with the move towards abstraction and the School of Paris, its conjunction with term *abstract expressionism* (which had been taking place in New York), blurred the distinctions between the two, and led to repercussions in terms of the way in which the subsequent 'Direction 1' exhibition was later assessed.[105]

The discussions which had been taking place between Olsen, Rose and Passmore - to break with the known and find a new way forward - were demonstrated to some extent in the works and comments in the 'Pacific Loan Exhibition', but the nature of the show was diverse and all-inclusive. Prior to 'Direction 1' it became evident to Olsen that the significant changes warranted a more cohesive group exhibition.

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[103] Paul Haefliger, 'Art of Australia for U.S. Display', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 October, 1956.

[104] *Body and Soul*, exhibition catalogue, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne, September, 1988. See preface by Elwyn Lynn, pp.5, 6.

[105] This discussion is an attempt to clarify how the idea of 'Direction 1' as being 'abstract expressionist' began and was perpetuated. In his account of the development of Australian art during this period Bernard Smith noted that 'Direction I' 'launched abstract expressionism on the scene in Sydney and the new mode was quickly accepted by the critics'. Nevertheless at the commencement of the same paragraph he commented that it was 'in Sydney...that the movement towards informal abstraction gathered the greatest momentum'. In the latter statement he is closer to the mark than the former in relation to Olsen's work in 'Direction I'. See Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting*, Oxford University Press, 1971, p.312.

Initially the idea was to incorporate works by Melbourne artists which were challenging purely figurative modes of expression. However this soon became unmanageable and it was finally decided that a more concentrated impact would be achieved by limiting the exhibition to a small group of Sydney artists, bound by friendship and their intense commitment to change: John Olsen, Bill Rose, John Passmore, Eric Smith and Robert Klippel.

Olsen included three works in the exhibition, *Atman 1*, *Atman 2* and *Dry Salvages* which were clearly continuations from the *View of the Western World* series. The title *The Atman* comes from the Hindu concept of the principle of life, 'the world spiritual self, from which all individual souls derive',[106] which would find a correspondence the following year with notes in Olsen's journals about Jung and the collective unconscious. In *The Atman 1* [107] space is not anchored by gravity, but is reversed as the bold, dark slabs of black and ochre reside in the centre and top of the painting. While there is nothing tentative in the overall construction of the painting, it is less open to external references than its counterpart, *Dry Salvages.*

Dry Salvages (pl13) is a carefully structured painting in its balance of dark and light, of bright touches of colour amidst a dark scaffolding, of alternating blue hues, which may in turn be interpreted as the flickering neon night lights of the city, against the shifting harbour. It is related to Eliot's poem of the same title and Olsen was particularly impressed by the line 'the river is within us, the sea is all around us'. The idea of the immersion of self in the natural world, of the inter-connection of energies in nature and human life, provided 'the bridge' Olsen had been seeking between the external and internal worlds and would be vital to his later work.

Another important literary source for Olsen was Dylan Thomas. He had begun reading Thomas in the late 1940s but it was only in the mid-1950s that he suddenly realised the *potential* implications of Thomas's radio play *Under Milk Wood* (described as 'prose of the bloodstream') as a means of re-interpreting the painting process. The key lay in the evolutionary progress of 'Under Milk Wood' in which Thomas gradually builds up an impression of the Welsh fishing village, Laugharne, through a series of overlapping sequences, unfolding from evening to early morning and back into night, brought together as 'a totality of experience'.

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[106] This relates to the discussions that Olsen had been engaging in with Robert Klippel about comparative religions, mentioned in the previous chapter.
[107] Viewed by the author in a private collection in Sydney.

The significance of Thomas's writing lay in the germination of ideas and the discussions which took place with other artists. However initially they found only a tentative correspondence in Olsen's paintings - with the multiple viewpoints brought together in a single work, 'as a totality'. The notions of time-space relationships, of building up a total impression of place through an accumulation of narrative detail and human incident, would require very different solutions. They would be applied by Olsen with great assurance in his paintings early in the following decade. As he acknowledged, 'I had the dream of a new kind of figuration, it was however still a long way from me'.[108]

Compared with Olsen's works, Passmore's were in a sense more liberated. 'Direction 1' was one of the few collaborative ventures in which Passmore ever participated. He had been immensely stimulated by his conversations with Olsen and he felt a sense of urgency to break through the boundaries of figuration and implement the new spirit of freedom into his work; 'nowhere more than in his 'Direction 1' paintings can we feel more profoundly the dilemma of adaptation - in his abandonment of a cautious approach to painting modelled outwardly on Cézanne, and his surrender to a romantic turbulent spirit which eddied beneath the surface'.[109] This surrender is most decisively felt in a work now titled *Chasing Mullet*, 1956 (fig.15), in the dramatic, gestural brushmarks that leap over the surface, as if racing towards a new destination. It was the only work in the exhibition which came close to abstract expressionism.

Robert Klippel recalls that Olsen and Rose were the motivators in bringing the 'Direction 1' exhibition to fruition. Of all of them he was the least affected by the 'French Painting Today' exhibition, which he found 'old hat'. Klippel was feeling at an extremely low ebb due to the dismissive approach to his own work in Sydney, since his return in 1950. He agreed to be included in the show because of the underlying intentions of the protagonists. 'In spirit I agreed with the idea. John and Bill Rose asked me to be in it, and I said, "Sure, great idea".' For Klippel, it provided a welcome opportunity to exhibit non-figurative work and he saw that in the context of Australia it was historically important. However he was dissatisfied with his own contributions, which he saw as the product of the barrenness of the previous few years, and 'escaped' in 1957 to New York.[110]

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[108] Pearce, *Art and Australia*, op.cit., p.498. This point of a 'new figuration' is significant as Olsen did not want to be either purely abstract or conventionally figurative.
[109] ibid.
[110] Robert Klippel, interview with the author,1990.

In retrospect Olsen and Klippel questioned the inclusion of Eric Smith, a religious painter who had won the Blake Prize for his *Scourged Christ* that year. Both respected Smith's integrity as an artist but in many ways he seemed stylistically closer to the Sydney Art Group,[111] and they considered that Ralph Balson's non-figurative work would have been a more appropriate inclusion. However prior to the exhibition, the atmosphere of change meant that criteria were not static but still evolving. Smith himself recalls that he felt caught up in the mood of excitement, that he engaged in discussions about the School of Paris (particularly Manessier) with John Olsen, and that he sensed immanent, radical shifts in his own painting.[112] There was also a link with Olsen in the sense of attempting to attain a spiritual dimension in his work.

'Direction 1' opened at Macquarie Galleries on 4 December 1956, lasted seven days, received a lukewarm reception from Paul Haefliger and was a financial failure. Klippel sold one sculpture and Olsen sold a work on paper prior to the opening, for eight guineas, that went towards expenses. The catalogue was a bare list of titles and prices, as was habitual at the time. Nevertheless it opened amidst much anticipation and speculation.

'Direction 1' is often cited as a benchmark in Australian art history in the move to abstraction and abstract expressionism. These artists were not, however, the sole protagonists of abstraction at the time and Olsen, Passmore and Smith ultimately never wanted to abandon figuration entirely. As all of the artists have testified, the exhibition had nothing to do with an interest in abstract expressionism, which was to develop rapidly in the ensuing years, after Olsen had departed from Australia. However in the context of Sydney in 1956 'Direction 1' it was an important event; motivated by vitality and enthusiasm, it indicated that the boundaries of perception were being challenged in new ways through their collective efforts.

Although in the evolution of 'Direction 1', the artists were not bound by any particular common principle, in the final analysis the broadly cohesive aspects of the exhibition included: a strong, structural emphasis, a new international awareness and an underlying metaphysical dimension in their works. They all shared a commitment to breaking with the bounds of convention, which they perceived to be the dominant mood of society in Sydney (and for that matter, Australia) in the 1950s. Exhibitions from Europe and signs of a new acceptance of abstraction were

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111 The Sydney Art Group was formed by contemporary Sydney painters in 1945 and included Wallace Thornton, Jean Bellette and David Strachan.
112 Pearce, *Art and Australia*, op.cit., p.503.

there, but in 'Direction 1' this small group decisively demonstrated that the changes that were 'in the air', were being built upon and realised in their own works.

In the overall context of John Olsen's work, the 'Pacific Loans Exhibition' and 'Direction 1' marked a new level of confidence and independence. 'It was significant by implication', he wrote, 'it was the comprehension of something waiting to be done. I was quite correct that it would take years, maybe a lifetime to work it out'.[113] In particular, many of the ideas which Olsen assimilated during this period from his reading of Paul Klee, Dylan Thomas and T.S. Eliot were to have considerable significance in the evolution of his own work in the ensuing decades.

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The end of 1956 represented a landmark of another kind for John Olsen. Businessman, Robert Shaw, and his wife at the time, had decided to sponsor a young Australian artist in the tradition of the European patrons of the arts. They approached Paul Haefliger, who had been keeping a watchful eye on Olsen's development, and they all agreed that he appeared to be the most suitable candidate. 'He was the right age, he had talent and he had integrity as an artist'.[114] The agreement was that they would send him to Europe and pay him a living allowance and that he, in return, would send back works for an exhibition in Australia. By the time that the 'Direction 1' exhibition concluded, Olsen had packed his bags and was on his way to discover, 'the experiences of a lifetime'.

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[113] ibid.

[114] Annette Olszanski, interview with the author. Olszanski was closely involved with the decision to select Olsen for the scholarship and recalls going to visit him in his small apartment in Victoria Street. 'He was absolutely amazed. He couldn't believe his ears!'

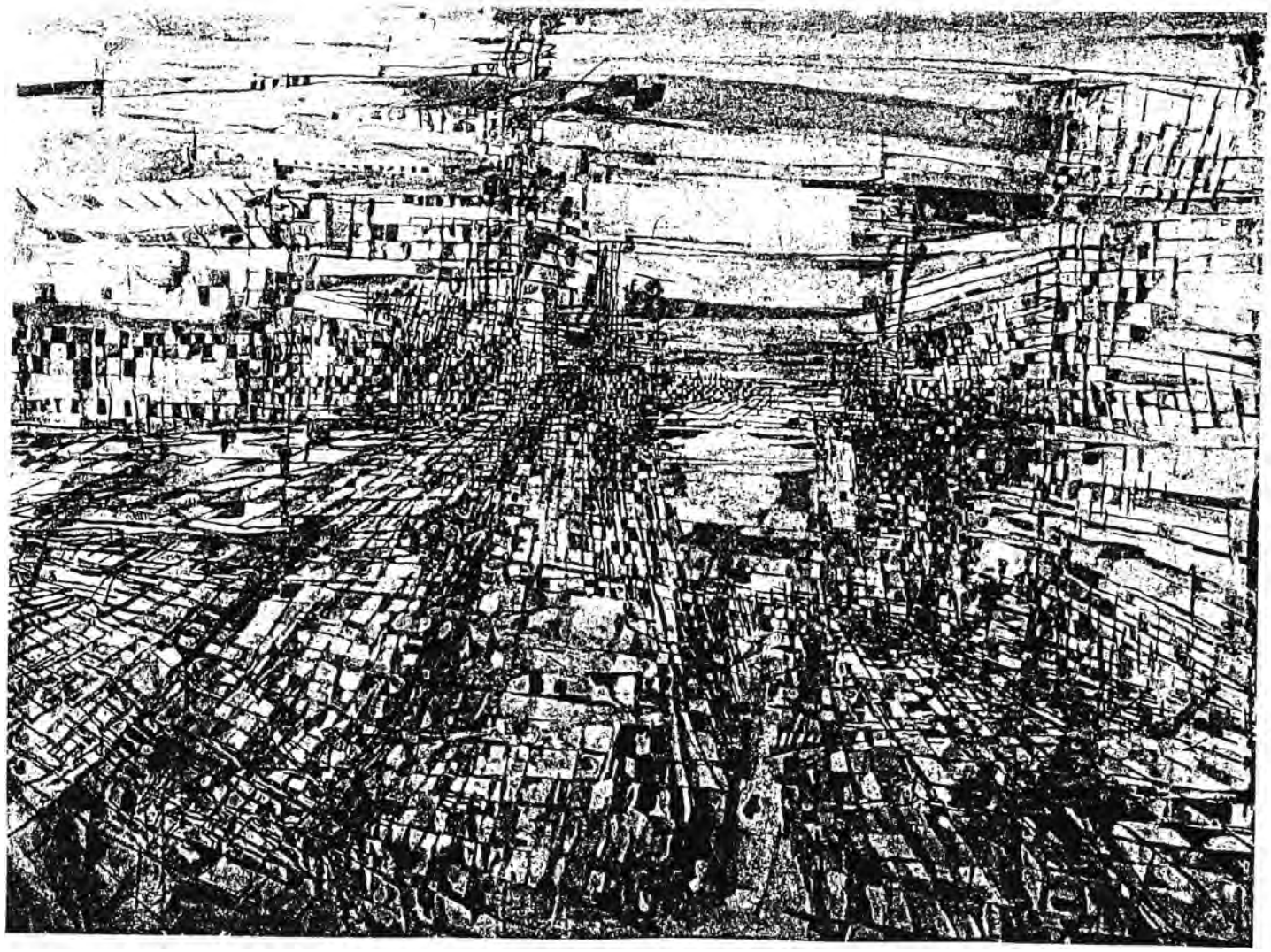


fig.13 Maria Vieira da Silva, *City Perspectives*, oil on canvas, 96.5 x 132cm. Collection Colonel Aubrey Gibson

fig.14 'Pacific Loan Exhibition: Contemporary Australian Art' 1956
Catalogue illustrations: Lawrence Daws, *Forces of the City 1* (above)
John Olsen, *View of the Western World No.2* (below)

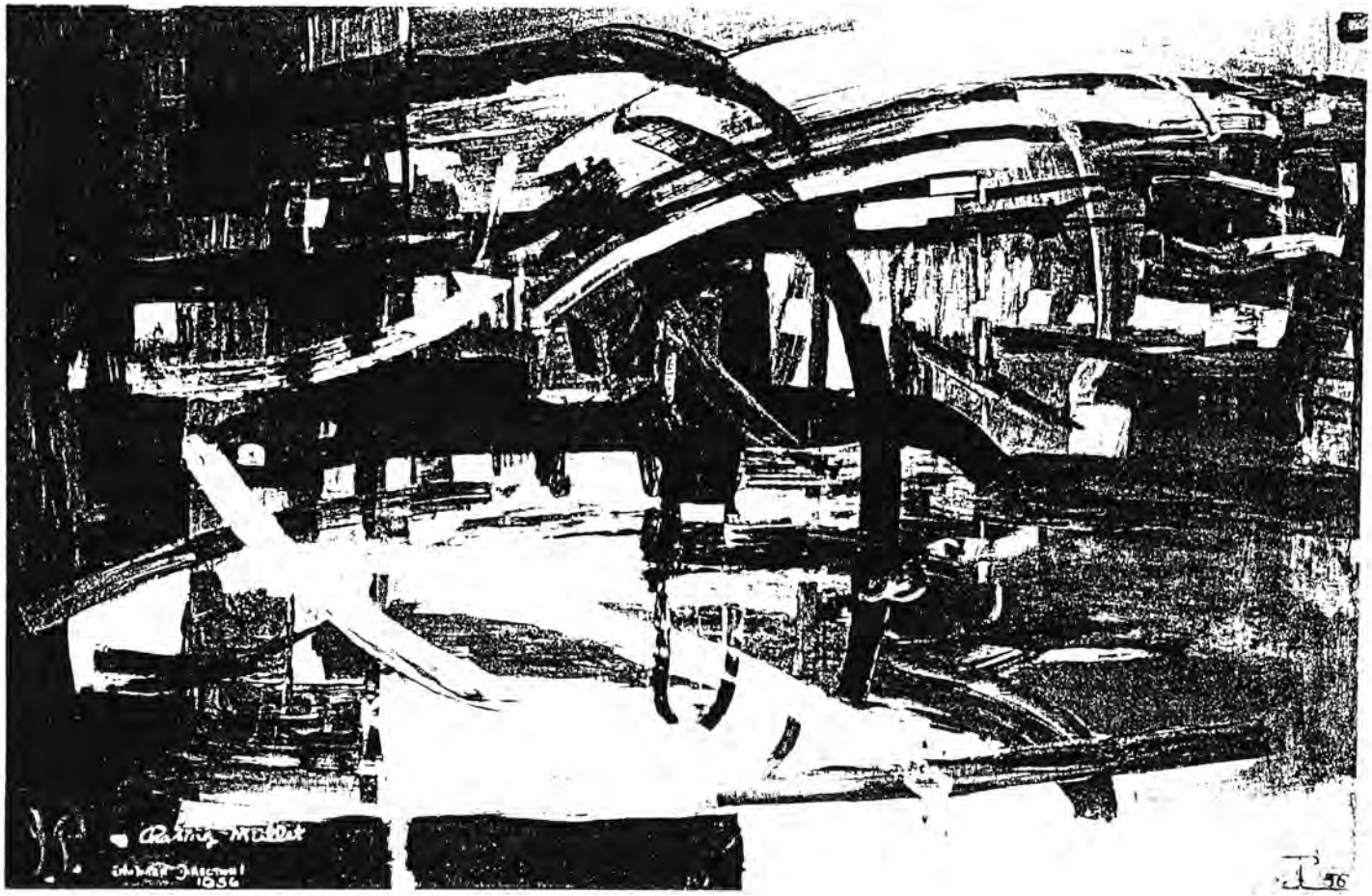
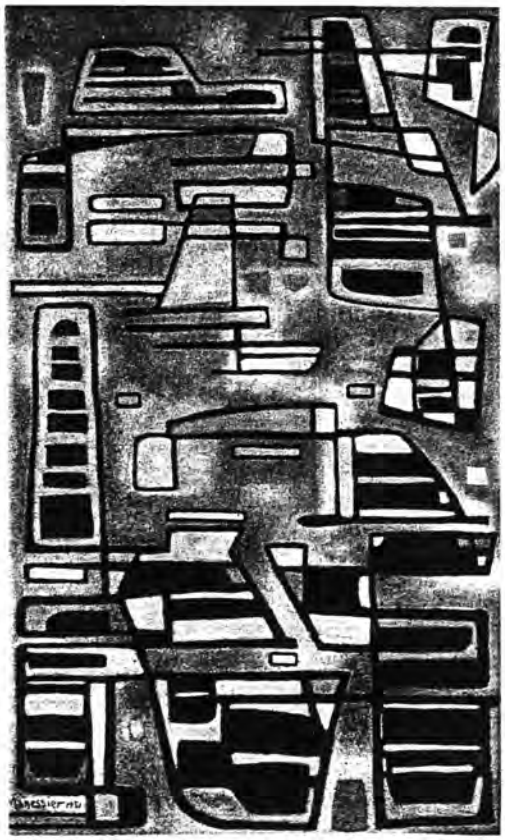
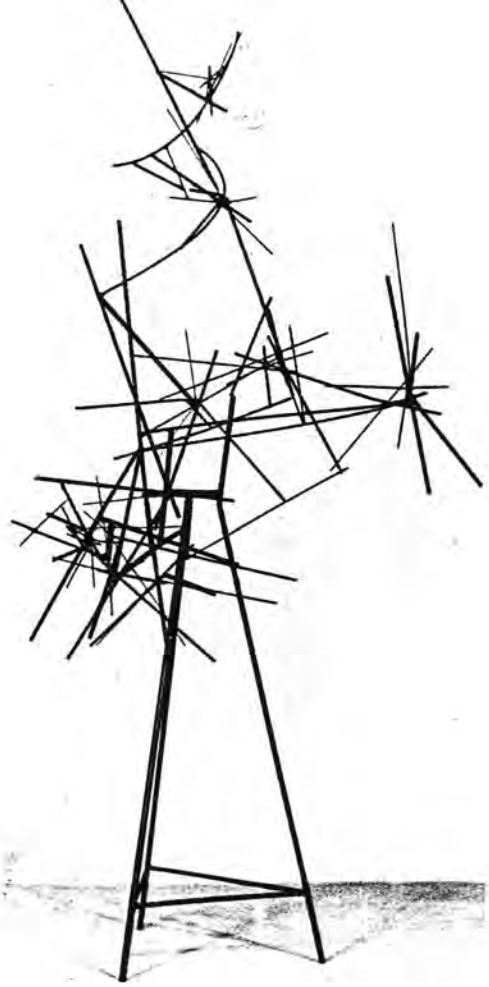
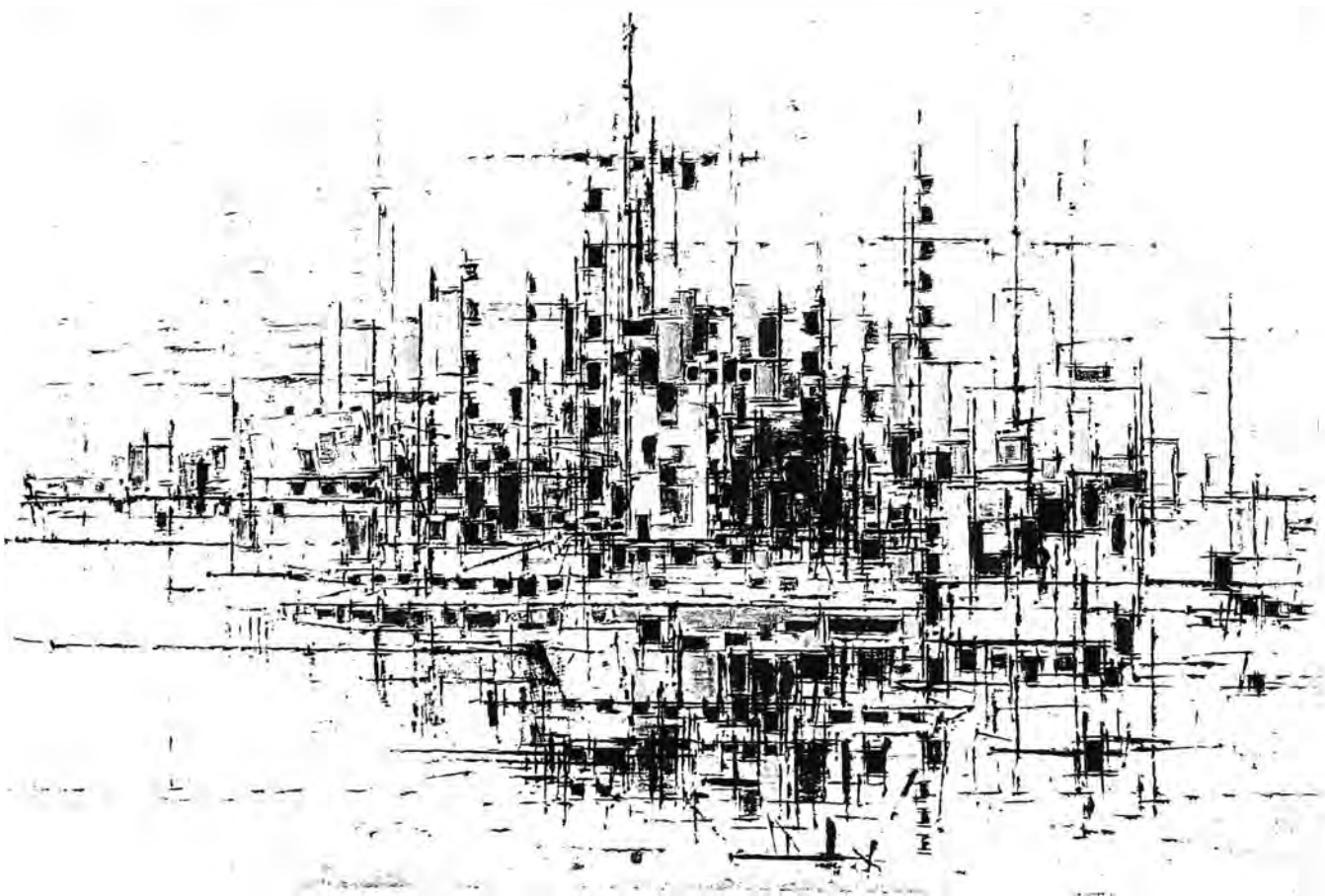


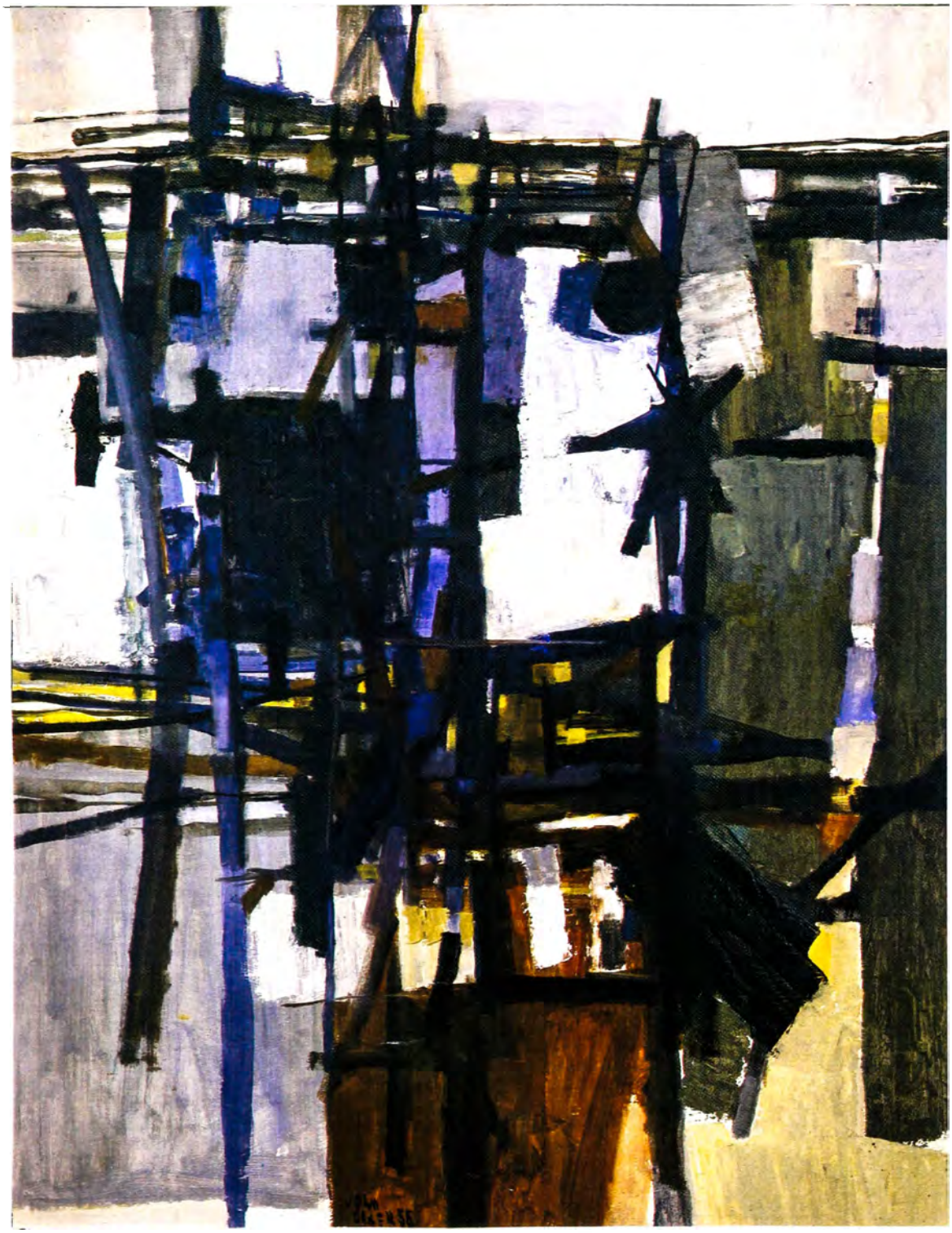
fig.15 John Passmore, *Chasing Mullet* 1956, oil on composition board, 121.8 x 182cm, Collection: Queensland Art Gallery



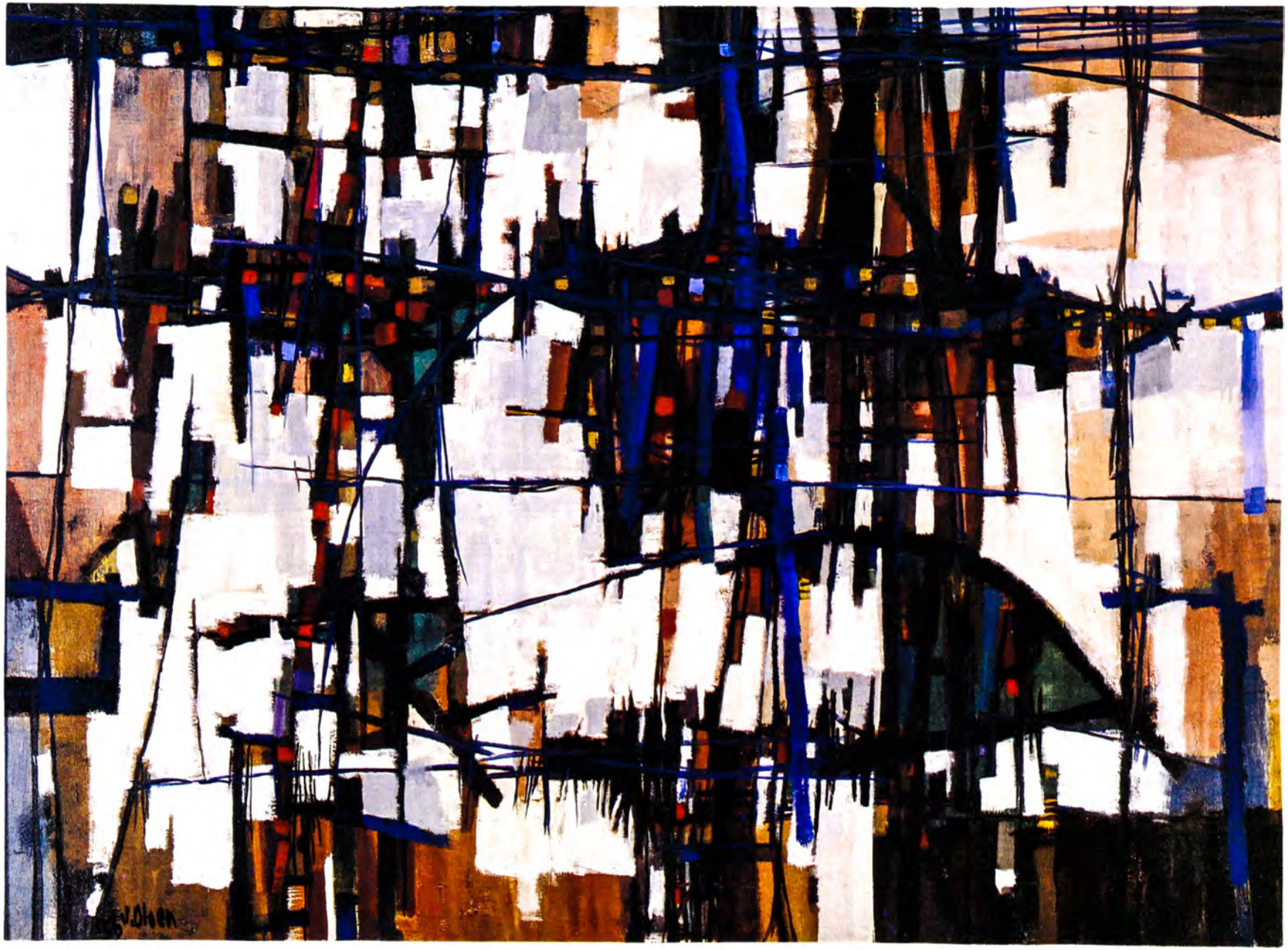


A constructive emphasis and faceting of forms, reflected in a number of the works of the School of Paris artists shown in the 'French Painting Today' exhibition, was also evident in diverse works in 'Direction 1'. *Left*: **fig.16** Illustration of Alfred Manessier's *The Sleeping Harbour* (undated) as shown in the catalogue for the French exhibition of 1953. *Centre*: **fig.17** Robert Klippel, *Construction* 1956, brazed metal, 61cm high. Private collection, New York. *Below*: **fig.18** Bill Rose, *(Direction 1)* 1956, oil on hardboard, 80.5 x 120.5cm. Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. (See Bibilography - Barry Pearce, 'Direction 1', *Art and Australia*, 1987)

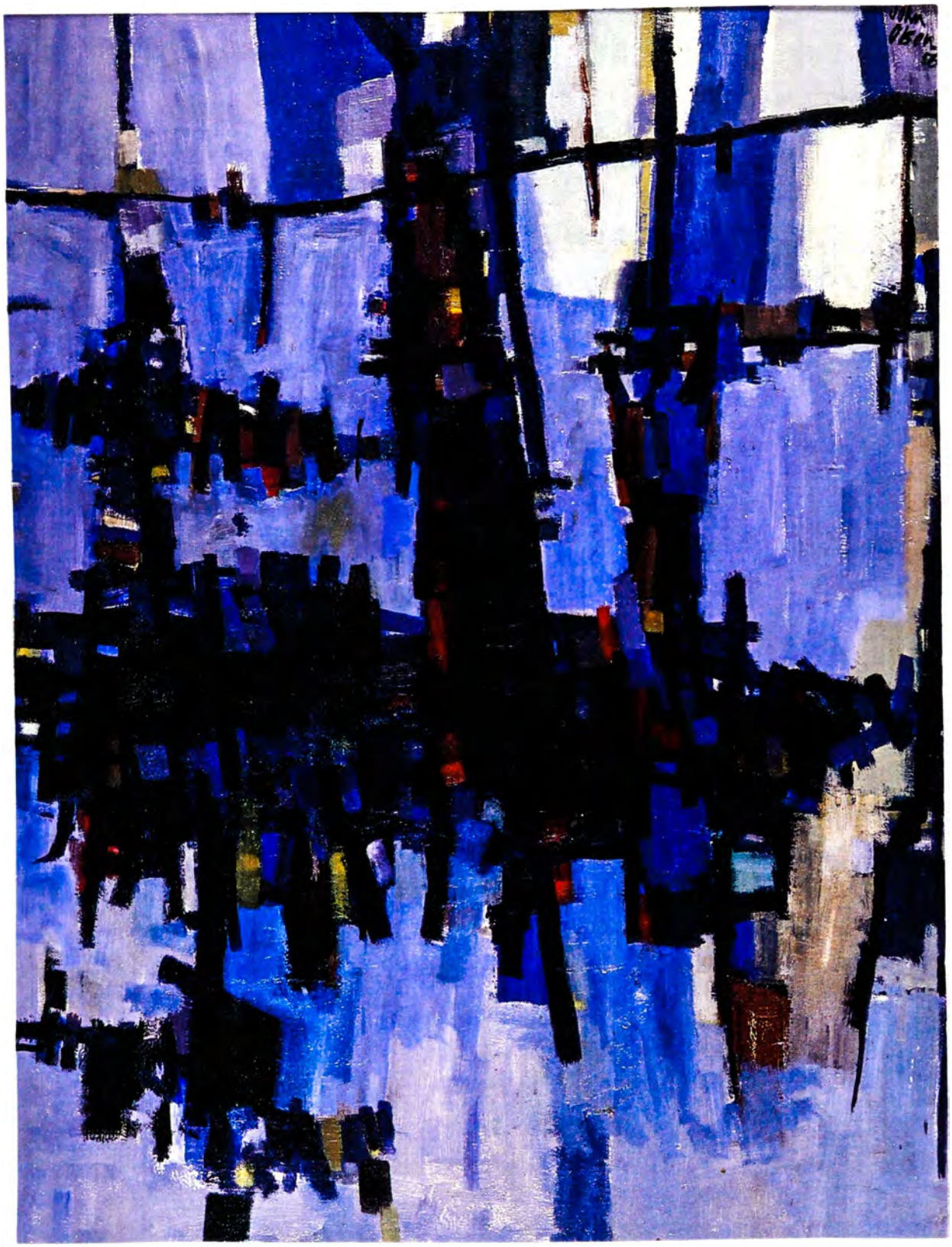




pl.11 *View of the Western World No.1* 1956, oil on board, 116.8 x 91.4cm
Private collection



pl.12 *View of the Western World No.3* 1956, oil on board, 91.5 x 122cm. Collection: Art Gallery of Western Australia



pl.13 *Dry Salvages* 1956, oil on hardboard, 119 x 90.9cm
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales.
Gift of E.M. Gardiner in memory of her daughter Marie Gardiner, 1972

CHAPTER 4

EARLY TRAVELS ABROAD: 1957 - 1960

Zen realises that our nature is at one with objective nature...in the sense that we live in nature and nature lives in us.

John Olsen, Journal 1958

The great gift of the Mediterranean, and hence the poetry of Homer and Virgil, was that its people had contrived a civilisation in which man and nature were in perfect harmony. The villages were somehow related to the olive trees and the whole balance of it was so beautiful. They also possessed a wisdom of how to live and what comes of that. It is simple enough, with wine, olives, aubergines, tomatoes...and the ice blue of the Mediterranean itself...

John Olsen[115]

At the time of his departure from Australia in December 1956, John Olsen was embarking on a journey into an unknown world with feelings of excitement, trepidation and the overwhelming sense that he had to make the most of his time there. He was under the inevitable pressure of the expectations placed upon him and was concerned that this might be his only opportunity to travel outside Australia. At that time, travel abroad for a young artist with scant financial resources beyond the stipend provided by his sponsor, meant, as he put it, 'that you were out to discover things, because in those days, you felt you might never get out again'.

Olsen's European journal reveals several significant preoccupations in the development of his art during the ensuing period: a deeply felt concern for the natural world and Oriental philosophy as well as an interest in archetypal imagery.[116] Underlying these concerns, he was constantly searching and

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115 John Olsen, *In Search of the Open Country 1961 - 1986*, Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, 1986, p.7.

116 Olsen's references to Eastern philosophy and his reading of Eugen Herigel's *Zen and the art of archery* reflect concerns held by many at the time. Christine France notes that Herigel's was 'the most widely owned book' by contemporary Australian artists in Sydney around this period. See *New Directions: 1952 - 1962*, The Lewers Bequest and Penrith Regional Art Gallery, 1991, p.10.

questioning the direction his art was taking, particularly in relation to process and discovering 'a new kind of figuration'. His journal is filled with notes and quotations from Buddhist philosophy, Japanese haiku, Jungian psychology and a range of poetry and prose. Together with his exposure to a wide range of art and artists, and time spent at 'Atelier 17' in Paris, his European experiences served as a means of developing a practical and philosophical basis in his art and life.

Before Olsen left, it was made eminently clear to him, both by his sponsor, Robert Shaw, and Shaw's mentor, Paul Haefliger, that he was not to make his base in England. They perceived that the English excelled in the literary rather than the visual arts, and that the place for a young artist at a crucial stage of his development lay decisively in Europe. Although Olsen did spend some valuable time in England and France, he resided for the most considerable period of his three years abroad in Spain. As it turned out, Olsen's romantic temperament was admirably suited to the Mediterranean way of life; to the atmosphere of Spain, and the islands of Ibiza and Majorca in particular, to the feel and look of this country, the attitudes of the people and the ambience of daily life, all of which not only filtered through to the subjects of some of his subsequent paintings and drawings, but substantively shaped the way he would choose to live in the future.

Olsen was waved off from Sydney shores by Bill Rose and other friends. The boat on which he was travelling, the *Orion*, berthed briefly in Fremantle on 15 December before embarking on a six-week journey stopping at Cape Town and the Canary Islands.[117] The *Orion* finally arrived in the London docks on a bitterly cold, grey winter's day in January 1957. On his arrival Olsen caught the train into the city and first stayed at the YMCA in Tottenham Court Road. He found London rather depressing, not only in response to the climate, but because of the general atmosphere which hung over the place in the aftermath of the Suez crisis. The Prime Minister, Anthony Eden, resigned early in 1957 after bitter debates about this debacle, which had left the country economically and in general morale at a low ebb.

Through Robert Klippel, Olsen had an introduction to Alan Davie, who had recently been awarded the Gregory Fellowship at Leeds University. Davie, who was also a poet and jazz musician, was developing a wide range of personal, abstracted and archetypal forms in his painting during this period. He was interested in Zen Buddhism and Jung, and wanted his painting to be a vital expression of the 'magical

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117 John Olsen, letter to Laurie Thomas, then Director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia, 22 October, 1956.

and mysterious', through signs, symbols and ritual.[118] Olsen was favourably impressed by Davie's work, both at this time and on a return visit to London in June 1958, when he saw his exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery.

After a few weeks Olsen travelled to Paris where he was met by his old art school friend, Earle Backen (who had won the New South Wales Travelling Scholarship in 1954). Looking back on the time of his arrival in France, Olsen wrote that he was 'an Australian artist, very wet behind the ears, but full of colonial presumption ... (with) an unbelievable accent learnt from a faulty reading of "Hugo's French in 3 months"'.[119]

The dramatic developments in the history of art and the surge of cultural energy that had occurred principally in France during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, had established this country as a centre of artistic activity. Despite the fact that by 1945 New York was being proclaimed as the new capital of the art world, Paris continued to be a vital magnet, drawing artists from around the globe as a place to live and work.

Most of these visiting artists stayed in the many small hotels around the city. It was in one of the old hotels near the Luxembourg Gardens, in a little room overlooking the rooftops of the surrounding buildings, that John Olsen lived during the following five or six months. On the opposite side of the Gardens was one of the major international forums in Paris - the famous printmaking workshop, 'Atelier 17', which was still being run by its founder, S.W. Hayter. Olsen was introduced to Hayter's workshop by Earle Backen who had been working there during the previous year. Although he had little knowledge of printmaking at that time, in the first instance it was for Olsen a means of making contacts and a starting point for his own work in Europe. However he quickly discovered that Hayter was an inspiring and highly innovative teacher who provided him with many valuable insights, particularly in relation to the creative process.

'Atelier 17' originated in 1927 as a result, Hayter later said, of 'being overwhelmed by the prevailing neglect of printmaking, the failure to be aware of its immense

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[118] Tom Cross, *Painting the Warmth of the Sun: St Ives Artists 1939 - 1975*, Allison Hodge, Cornwall and Lutterworth Press, Surrey, 1984, pp.166, 167.

[119] John Olsen, *My Complete Graphics*, Australian Galleries and Gryphon Books, Melbourne, 1980, p.15.

possibilities'.[120] The focus of the work that occurred there was *gravure*, or engraving. Despite the magnificent engravings in previous centuries, printmaking was still regarded as something of a lesser art form. The problem lay in its association with the reproduction of images, rather than as an art form in itself. Hayter affirmed the importance of engraving as a means of *original* creative expression conditioned by its own special techniques: burin and dry-point, etching and aquatint.[121] In the twentieth century it was Hayter, probably more than any other individual, who provided the catalyst for a large number of artists from around the world to explore the manifold possibilities of printmaking.

From about 1933 'Atelier 17' was frequented by members of the Surrealist group and those associated with the School of Paris. These artists included Max Ernst, Giacometti, Miro and Masson, as well as Manessier and Vieira da Silva (the latter continuing to attend the workshop during Olsen's time there). During the Second World War, Hayter moved to New York due to political pressures, where the school was re-established, attracting the attention of American abstract expressionists such as Pollock, de Kooning and Motherwell. In 1950 Hayter moved back to Paris and by the time John Olsen attended the studio it was both distinctively French and international in character, in terms of its historical development and the artists it drew to Paris from around the world.

John Olsen remembers Hayter as 'in his mid-fifties...elegant, even handsome in a scruffy kind of way, but like every good printmaker that I have ever known his skin seemed to be stained with printers' ink. His hands were cracked with turps and he had nails like coal faces'.[122] There was a good atmosphere at the studio among the artists and they worked long hours, commencing at 8.30 in the morning, with a break for lunch at a student cafe, and then continuing until around 7.30 in the evening. While Hayter's teaching methods were by no means vague or undisciplined, there was a sense of informality in his classes.

Hayter stressed that his intention was not to establish a 'school' as such, but a place for intensive experimentation, undertaken by artists of divergent backgrounds and

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120 P.M.S. Hacker, *The Renaissance of Gravure: The Art of S.W. Hayter*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1988, p.118. This valuable source document provides insights into the history and teaching methods of 'Atelier 17'. It includes a collection of essays and the catalogue of Hayter's Retrospective Exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 11 October - 27 November, 1988.

121 Michel Conil Lacoste, 'Atelier 17', *Modern Art Yesterday and Tomorrow: An Anthology of Writings from the French Magazine L'Oeil*, edited by Georges and Rosamond Bernier, A. Zwemmer Ltd, London (n.d.), p.163.

122 Olsen, *My Complete Graphics*, op.cit., p.18.

stages of development. 'Although it has been mistaken by innocent people', he commented, 'Atelier 17' was not a school...At any time, mature artists of world-wide reputation may be working alongside lesser known artists of different ages... amidst some thirty...people, a dozen nationalities may be represented'.[123] He did not to attempt to provide an 'illusion of knowledge' through didactic discourse, but rather to encourage learning through active participation. Although he provided clear directives in his teaching methods, Hayter saw this not in terms of a traditional teacher-pupil relationship but rather as a collective venture of discovery. In his book *About Prints*, he described his teaching methods:

> The initiation of new-comers into the particular methods of the Atelier is done in such fashion, that from the first, work is originated in the plate itself and not copied from a drawing already existing. Instruction consists in involving a student in experiments in conditions completely unfamiliar to him in which a development... is carried on until the plate is destroyed. As the 'state' proof of each stage of the development is kept, a complete record exists; development is by metamorphosis rather than by accretion, and in the hundreds of times such an experiment is made I have never seen two alike nor one in which something I did not yet understand had happened. The object of all this is to arrive at knowledge that belongs to the person, in the sense that word of mouth can only give the illusion of knowledge of that which is known to the professor.[124]

John Olsen's *Studies at Hayter's* reveal this successive and metamorphic approach. The plate would be worked on again and again until it was wafer thin and virtually destroyed. It was a liberating and adventurous way of working which reduced the pressure to produce a single, definitive art work. Later in his life Olsen recalled that these ideas became helpful when he experienced conflicts in his art, because it allowed him to think of work as 'a series of actions'. Hayter encouraged inventiveness not only through the etched line on the surface but also through the application of a wide range of materials - sticks, leaves, twigs, pieces of mesh and fabric - adding a textural dimension to the resulting works.

In many ways Hayter's approach provided a natural extension of Olsen's previous training and the discoveries which he had begun to make after leaving art school, particularly in relation to the emphasis on process and inductively seeking out the forms in the course of working. Like Olsen, Hayter felt a great affinity with Klee and Kandinsky, particularly in relation to the role of spontaneity and inventiveness. He also shared their interest in 'the course' followed by line and its dynamic and

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[123] Stanley William Hayter, *About Prints*, Oxford University Press, London, 1962, p.92.
[124] ibid. pp. 92, 93.

psychological potential; ideas which became increasingly important to Olsen in his subsequent investigations.[125]

Also important in Olsen's future development was the notion of the unexpected. Another student, Jean Lodge, who attended 'Atelier 17' a little later wrote: 'For Hayter making pictures is a profound, sometimes amusing, and always daring 'game'. "If it looks out of balance, unbalance it even more." He provoked me to look for movement, surprise, the unexpected...to take pictorial risks and avoid predictable stability and harmony'.[126]

Hayter had been inspired by the Surrealist idea of automatism, the spontaneous workings of the unconscious, which provided the source of his approach to experimentation. John Olsen responded to the idea of working directly onto the plate, of exposure to the unfamiliar and taking risks in the development of the work, all of which have a bearing on his attitudes to painting and drawing - of not doing many preliminary drawings in a traditional manner and not being content with the predictable. However of equal importance to him was the fact that Hayter's method was never formless or undirected. As S.W. Hayter wrote:

> Thus if the source of material for such work is irrational, its development and execution need to be entirely logical, not with a strict mechanical logic, but in accordance with the sort of system of consequences having its own logic. At different stages of the work, a choice is exercised, but with extreme caution against the application of pedestrian common sense when inspiration flags. Paul Klee says, 'To continue merely automatically is as much a sin against the creative spirit as to start work without true inspiration'.[127]

It was this distinction between the interplay of the unconscious and a structured approach, as opposed to a more open, independent form of automatism commonly identified at the time with abstract expressionism, that John Olsen was to make in relation to his own attitudes to the creative process. Olsen first encountered some of the lesser American 'action painters' at the American Club in Paris in 1957. The American Club in the Boulevard Raspail had been established as a meeting place for Americans during the 1920s. It included a library and relaxation areas, and on its

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[125] Lacoste (op. cit.) makes specific reference to notions of the 'topology' and 'psychology' of line and form, p.167. Hayter provided suggestions about these concepts applied in a practical manner, but always encouraged his students to make their own discoveries.
[126] Hacker, op. cit. Essay by Jean Lodge, 'Working at Atelier 17', p.45.
[127] ibid., S.W. Hayter, 'Miscellaneous Remarks', p.119.

upper level a large loft area had been transformed into a studio where American artists (and occasionally those of other nationalities) could paint.

Studio space was scarce in Paris in the 1950s and both John Olsen and Earle Backen worked there from time to time. Most of the American artists there worked flat on the floor, and although Olsen would later occasionally adopt this approach himself, he was disturbed by the apparent lack of discipline and structure in their work. He relayed his concerns through an interview in the *Nation Review* early the following decade: 'But every now and again, one of them would give forth with "Go, man go!" as he watched another activist slush enamel across the floor. This form of mutual encouragement was not in Olsen's line.'[128]

Earle Backen recalls that a large exhibition of American abstract expressionist works had arrived in Paris the previous year, the vitality of which 'struck people like a thunderbolt', and was the cause for excitement as well as concern.

> There was a conference at the American Club on the that theme - Where is art going? Is the image finished? And people were getting very uptight. There was a very strong tradition in France of abstract painting that had come from realism. You abstracted from realism - Gromiere, Pignon and Nicholas de Stael (who had already committed suicide but still had a tremendous influence with young painters in France)...and Vieira da Silva.[129]

In the broader context of Olsen's developing attitudes and later work, it is worth mentioning that these initial views about abstract expressionism, were based on a general assessment of new directions in painting. They appear to indicate a rather more homogeneous approach than was actually the case in the work of its major exponents. Olsen's comments in his journal of the following year demonstrate a keener understanding of these distinctions. Although he recognised that Pollock was a significant innovator, he was to develop a greater preference for the obviously referential work of de Kooning (such as the Gotham nudes): 'a humanist whose Dutch antecedents were not difficult to detect...and whose work is firmly steeped in the Surrealism of Arschille Gorky' - [as opposed to] Pollock's mature paintings, with their 'dribble technique (and) fierce Whitmanesque lashing gestures'.[130]

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[128] *Nation Review*, July, 1963, p.11. It is interesting in this regard to note the consistency of Olsen's attitude to abstract expressionism later on.
[129] Earle Backen, interview with the author.
[130] John Olsen, Journal, 1958.

Although in many ways Olsen's approach was still closer to the French idea of abstracting from reality he felt disillusioned with much of the work by the School of Paris that he saw at the time. In an article sent back to the Contemporary Art Society Broadsheet (July edition, 1958) in Sydney, he wrote that he felt that their work was generally 'at a low ebb' and expressed particular dislike for the 'slick and arbitrary' paint surfaces of Pierre Soulages.[131] By contrast, it was the work of Jean Dubuffet which Olsen found to be among the most stimulating, 'original and influencing many (he) rejoices in his wonderful surfaces and assures that it is still possible to create wittily'.

Dubuffet's highly inventive paintings included bizarre faces and figures and trowelled, weathered surfaces obtained through the use of a wide range of materials. He was one of the leading artists in a general movement away from the constructive abstraction of the School of Paris, towards 'subject-matter' figures with an emphasis on the irrational. Together with a growing number of artists in the 1940s and 1950s, such as the CoBrA group (1948-1951),[132] Dubuffet was inspired by primitive art, child art, the art of the mentally disturbed and naive art. The origin of these developments lay at the turn of the century in the works of artists such as Picasso, Kandinsky and Klee (and later, Joan Miro).

John Olsen's later work can be seen to be part of this general move towards irrational figuration. He met several former members of the CoBrA group, including Corneille, Asger Jorn and Jean Lucebert. In some instances Olsen's work of the early 1960s bears a striking resemblance to examples of the work of Appel, Jorn, Lucebert[133] and Pierre Alechinsky; in particular in relation to their use of fantastic, metamorphic imagery. However Olsen objects to the overstatement of their influence. In his own estimation they were one link in a whole range of sources which he encountered in the 1950s, which gradually evolved into the use of human and metamorphic imagery; 'I liked Aboriginal art, the art of New Guinea and the Pacific before I even saw CoBrA...I was also very influenced by Romanesque

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131 Nevertheless, *Initiation No.2* does have affinities with Soulages's use of thick black line as a 'signifier'.

132 The CoBrA group derived its name from the initials of its members' home cities: Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam. Sometimes the group is simply referred to as 'Cobra', see Stokvis below.

133 Although Lucebert was only indirectly involved with the CoBrA movement for a short time, he was stimulated by the ideas that emerged from the group in his connection with the irrational world of Surrealism, adapted in an expressive, improvisational manner and given a distinctive energy through poetic associations. (See Willemijn Stokvis, *Cobra: An International Movement in Art after the Second World War*, Rizolli International Publications, New York, 1988.) Much the same could be said of Olsen's work in its evolution over the next few years.

art...an imaginative response to figures and a flattening out and distortion of shapes and form and scale'.[134]

Because Olsen and Corneille became friends during this period and travelled to Spain together, it was later automatically assumed by some Australian critics that Olsen's irrational imagery in the sixties was derivative of this Dutch artist's work. However, Corneille's paintings in the fifties were much closer to the School of Paris and what he evidently shared with Olsen at the time was an interest in organic landscapes seen from multiple viewpoints, and in Klee's idea of taking the line for a journey through the landscape.[135]

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Although Olsen had found the atmosphere in Paris stimulating, he felt dissatisfied with most of the paintings which he did there. Staying in a hotel gave him the sense of transience, of being a temporary guest, and the cost of living was high. He therefore decided to visit some friends who lived on the island of Majorca. Olsen first travelled to Spain with Corneille, on the back of his motor scooter: 'I used to fall off every day, it was part of the ritual'. His initial impressions of the country and its people were a revelation:

> I remember stopping for lunch at a tiny fishing village, and there like a table cloth laid out upon the sand were long fishing nets - men and women dressed in black but barefooted, donkeys, carts, fishing baskets. Unlike France which seemed all air and atmosphere, this was figured in an air of symbolism, the shadows for example were more distinctive and fascinating than the actors who cast them. The yellow sand, the white village houses, the cart wheels in shadow reveal an intense atmosphere of surrealism. In an instant I could understand the Spanish tradition (of) Zurbaran, Velasquez, Goya, Dali, Picasso.[136]

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[134] It would appear that Olsen's refutation was in part against the idea that his work was purely derivative of the CoBrA artists - a reaction that he understandably saw as one dimensional. However, as noted in the following chapter, there is little doubt that some of Olsen's paintings do have correspondences with the work of several in the CoBrA group and Dubuffet but that this was filtered and adapted in relation to his own perceptions of the Australian environment.

[135] Willemijn Stokvis, *Cobra: An International Movement in Art after the Second World War*, op.cit. Stokvis notes that from the early 1950s Paul Klee was a very important influence on Corneille. 'Owing to his thoughtful way of working and aesthetic colour, for a long time he was not seen as a Northern Expressionist but was more or less assigned to the Ecole de Paris.' p.23. Examples of his works in this publication (figs.97 - 99) bear these comments out. There are connections between Corneille's works *Pierre et fleurs*, 1955, and *Le port blanc*, 1956, and Olsen's *Bush Walk*, 1957 and *Dylan's Country*, 1957.

[136] Olsen, *In Search of the Open Country 1961-1986*, op.cit., p.7.

Olsen was enamoured with Majorca where he stayed with his friends, Charles Salisbury and Ron Miller, on the outskirts of Palma, near to where Miro had a studio. He was impressed by the extraordinarily low cost of living in the Balearic islands and decided to remain there. His first place of residence, was an apartment in the old, walled town of Ibiza, characterised by its winding streets and whitewashed Moorish architecture. Both in Ibiza and Majorca, Olsen was struck by the integration of the architecture and the landscape: by the many old dwellings weathered by time; by gnarled grey-green olive trees and the presence of the blue Mediterranean ocean.

It was during this period that Olsen began to work consistently towards his exhibition which he sent back to Sydney in July the following year. He discovered through his reading of Zen philosophy a confirmation of his own intuitive response to nature, 'to be in union with nature, not in conflict with her as we are in the West'. In his journal he noted, 'Zen purposes to respect nature, to love nature. Zen realises that our nature is at one with objective nature though not in a mathematical sense, but in the sense that we live in nature and nature lives in us'.

In his landscape-based works of this period, Olsen began attempting to convey his empathetic response to the natural world. Compared to the geometric organisation of his paintings the previous year, these works are striking in their organic, free-flowing approach to line, form and colour. There is lucidity in his application of the oil paint in *Bush Walk* (pl.15) which in places approximates the translucency of watercolour, as well as a sensitivity to colour combinations - vibrant touches of blue-greens and orange against the soft greys and a bright patch of white. It is suggestive of paths, animalistic shapes and plant forms; of things growing and emerging in nature and in the imagination.[137]

In *Bush Walk* (pl.15), *Dylan's Country* (pl.16) and *Cornish Winter*, Olsen was coming closer to evoking the mood and feeling of the subjects - the flux of the seaport; the spiky growth of the bush; memories of the cool, grey wintry atmosphere. He wanted to do this in a *suggestive* way, which would in turn allow for an imaginative response on the part of the viewer. This was in some ways analogous with his interest in poetic rather than didactic imagery in writing. Referring to a line of Japanese haiku which mentioned a 'Chinaberry tree', Olsen noted in his journal in 1957: 'My poetic reaction is not impeded by the fact that I

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137 On reflection I am struck by the similarities of this work and an image by Santomoso from the Cavinelli Collection titled *Green Souvenir*, 1952. See Barry Pearce, 'Direction 1', *Art and Australia*, vol.24, no.4, 1987, p.503. As Pearce points out the work was illustrated in *XX siecle*, no.5, June 1955 and a copy of the magazine was in Passmore's studio.

have no knowledge of a Chinaberry tree. Indeed the word conveys a more beautiful and fantastic image than it would if I were actually familiar with the botanic specimen. In other words the imagination often works more effectively and poetically if left questioning'.

Dylan's Country (pl.16) relates back to his interest in Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* which he saw as a means of gradually developing a total impression of the seaport. Here, compared with his earlier works, Olsen comes closer to this idea through the evolutionary progress of line . In the catalogue of his 1958 exhibition he wrote:

> I feel in paintings like *Dylan's Country*...that one gets the feeling of the landscape as a totality as opposed to the Renaissance idea: here I stand where I look is the landscape. This is too visual and the basic flaw is that it does not inhabit the landscape. Questions come to mind: What is it like to get a totality of the Riverina, the deadheart and other parts of our wonderful landscape - to travel through, to feel the rise and fall of hill and plain, to circumvent and come back where I have been before - I cannot help thinking of Klee's lead when he said line goes for a holiday.

In *Landscape Mediterranean*(pl.14) the paint surface is built up layer upon layer, sometimes scratched into with fine, delicate lines. It is one of the earliest examples where the shape of the landscape is loosely analogous with a body and where the topography appears to be both aerial and microscopic. Olsen provides an impression of the whole and extracts and magnifies small details, such as the precisely drawn pod-like shape in the lower centre.

These ideas of taking the line on an imaginary journey through the landscape; of nature viewed not in an objective or impartial way but to be participated in and actively experienced; of the landscape seen from above and microscopically observed, were to remain vital components of Olsen's later work. Gradually he was beginning to feel a greater confidence in the progress he was making, than he had done in Paris, 'I am coming to grips with painting and a lot of work which I felt had no sense is beginning to make sense. I begin to feel the responsibility of my own self and being - that I have to nourish my own plant'.

During 1957 and 1958, John Olsen was becoming increasingly interested in the use of archetypes in painting partly through the inspiration of Alan Davie, as well as his

on-going interest in Jung and comparative religion.[138] In works such as *The Christian*, *The Chief* and *Initiation No.2* (pl.17) Olsen was exploring another way of incorporating a sense of the subject on a more mystical level. In the catalogue of his 1958 exhibition Olsen referred to Herbert Read's essay on Jung and the idea of the collective unconscious: 'From the unconscious of the individual emerge the shapes and images and fantasy which follow archaic patterns to which the name archetypes has been given...The deeper we penetrate the cloud of unknowing by contemplation and intuition, the less likely we are to find images of our waking world'.

Carl Jung perceived that 'just as the human body represents a whole museum of organs, each with a long evolutionary history behind it, so we should expect the mind to be organised in a similar way. It can no more be a product without history than is the body in which it exists ...'. Jung felt that the archetype was the tendency to form representations of images from the 'collective unconscious' but that they could vary a great deal without losing their basic pattern.[139]

In *Initiation No. 2* the boldly painted arrow, Celtic cross and tower-like shape thrusting upwards into space, create a strong hieratic presence like a tribal totem. The basic composition relates back to the structure of *The Rabbiters* the year before but here forms or signifiers and colours have been reduced to more abstract forms to maximise their impact.[140] The suggestion of ritual and affinity with tribal art are also apparent in *The Chief*, which creates an impression of monumentality, despite the modest dimensions of the work itself. Apart from archetypal references Olsen was also becoming interested in conceptions of space in Oriental brush drawings, 'In Chinese and Japanese it is crawling up space, ascending space. Rather than moving into one moves over, up and down...the projections in are rather negligible'.[141]

When these works returned to Australia for his exhibition at Macquarie Galleries in August 1958, they received a mixed reception. Laurie Thomas wrote that it was a 'remarkable exhibition'. 'The results are sometimes startling and dramatic, sometimes moody and suggestive...they are always strong and full of conviction - if not always wholly artistic'.[142] Robert Hughes had only just commenced as a twenty

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138 As mentioned in the previous chapter this interest in comparative religion had already been expressed in works of 1956 and had germinated from his talks on the subject with Robert Klippel.
139 See also Carl Jung, *Man and his Symbols*, Picador, London, 1978, p.57.
140 Although Olsen had noted that he was disappointed by the work of Soulages, there are affinities in Initiation No.2 with this French artist's use of broad application of black brushmarks.
141 John Olsen journal, 1958.
142 *Sun* (Sydney), 6 August, 1958.

year-old art critic for the *Observer*, wrote a review, 'Killing Abstractionists'. 'The door to the picture is generally closed...these works exhibit the bifurcation between artist and public that is eventually going to kill abstract art'.[143] Eight years later he wrote of these same paintings:

> Olsen's vocabulary was now enriched by an interest in mandalas, crosses, towers, thrusting arrows, magical emblems whose half-disclosed meaning confronts us across a thousand years of Celtic twilight...Plastically these paintings of 1957-58 were more inventive than his Australian work...subtly geared to the moods of Cornwall and the Spanish plains, while the pigment itself...suggested the growth of the landscape'.[144]

However, in retrospect, these works still very much represented a transitional stage in Olsen's development. During this initial period away from Australia, Olsen was absorbing a wide range of experiences and he was anxious, in part because of the pressure of the exhibition, to determine his sense of direction as quickly as possible. He often felt frustrated by an awareness that his work was still evolving towards what he was aiming for and frequently sought balance through his philosophical enquiries and reading. In February of 1958 he noted in his journal:

> How can a mind that is in conflict create anything of lasting value - for first it moves this way and that - perpetually endeavouring to resolve it. Contradiction for a mind that is in constant quarrel eventually ends up in frustration. The "self" or the real self knows none of these contradictions for we cannot say "I force myself to rest" but "I am rested"...I did not force myself to grow but I have grown...The understanding of this makes one realise what a delicate thing artistic talent is for we cannot will that we do good work, but merely that we do what we can.

During 1958 John Olsen was constantly attempting to infuse a greater awareness of subject matter into his art, even returning in one instance to an earlier theme in *Boys and Bicycle* (pl.18). The paint surface is more richly textured than his previous paintings of this subject. Here the boy attached to the front wheel has become absorbed into the paint surface itself, indicating an integration and equivalence of forms within the overall conception. In a sense this work forms a bridge between the irrational figuration of *The Bicycle Boys* of the mid-fifties, and his subsequent

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143 *Observer* (Sydney), 23 August, 1958.

144 Robert Hughes, *The Art of Australia*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1986, p.263. (First published in 1966). By the early 1960s Hughes had become a friend and colleague and took a keen interest in Olsen's art.

discoveries, in which the figures were to become absorbed into the landscape, as a 'totality of experience' observed from multiple viewpoints.

John Olsen spent a few months in 1958 travelling in Europe and then back to England. The brief notes in his journal during this period provide us with further insights into his personality and his great sensitivity to the environments around him. In March he visited Seville and Granada (the birthplace of the poet Lorca, whose work he was reading at the time). In Granada he was struck by the contrast between the rich, fertile country surrounding the city and the appalling poverty of many of its people.

> I have never before seen people trapped in a moneyless world - in which they have no power to escape...How can any country have prosperity with an enormous standing army...police force and non producing clergy? One can feel the death and decadence of Franco's regime and its poverty of ideas.

In France one of Olsen's most moving experiences was a visit to Chartres Cathedral with its 'transcendent, soaring imagination (and) defiance of space'. For him it appeared to be a superhuman work. 'One did not think of subject when viewing its windows - a feeling of glorious bathing of original source...a medium for the vital force.' On a subsequent visit to this country, it was the Lascaux caves, which he found inspiring. 'What constantly appears in my mind is the absolute impossibility of reproducing these wonderful drawings...The curiosity of the placement of the drawings is the concentric movement from one creature moving into the next, so that compositionally the work is very exciting.'

Back in London, Olsen spent some time catching up on exhibitions. He saw shows by Keith Vaughan and Terry Frost, which he found disappointing.[145] By contrast he also saw an Alan Davie exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery which lived up to all his expectations. Olsen continued to do some of his own painting in London but ultimately never found the environment conducive to his work and seldom felt satisfied with what he had done there. By July he noted that Redfern Gallery had taken two of his works for a group exhibition. On the subject of trying to get a one man exhibition in London, he considered that his work was not yet ready, 'What I

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[145] John Olsen wrote in his journal, 11 June, 1958: 'Went to a show of Keith Vaughan and Terry Frost at the Leicester Gallery. Vaughan I did not like at all - distortions were too arbitrary and un-figure like...Frost unfortunately is completely disintegrated by a multiple of influences. Certainly he approaches things with zest and vitality...but he has lost the sense of moody concentration that his work had when I last saw him'.

need to do is work myself clearer...It is certainly fatal to think of successful pictures - just do works of integrity'.

There was, however, one aspect of life that John Olsen really did enjoy in London, which he discovered in the course of his visits with friends to music hall performances and the Portabello Road. It was here that Olsen believes he first discovered the true meaning of what it was to be a vaudevillian:

> I used to walk down from Notting Hill on a usually grey morning. There at the bottom of the hill are lines of barrows with a fantastic assortment of wares from expensive antiques to pieces of rusty iron and electrical things...(and) a mixture of people that seem almost as varied as the goods themselves.
>
> A favourite pub we were drawn to one morning by a cheery tinkling of a piano and raucous voices bleeting, "She's my Lady Love" is the "Portabello Star"...a roar of bubbly voices, clinking of glasses. The pianist playing with people absolutely squashing him into the piano - he quite oblivious was beating it out with fantastic zeal...they were the jolliest crowd I have seen in London.[146]

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Olsen returned to Majorca with an American friend late in July 1958. He was looking for a place to live and was alerted by an estate agent to a house which had been unoccupied for a long time in a place called Deya. This was most fortuitous because from the time of their arrival Olsen knew that he had found an extraordinary location in which to live and work. His experience of daily life there and of an old Mediterranean culture made a considerable and lasting impression on John Olsen and inculcated in him a feeling for the way he would choose to live in later years.

For one as romantically inclined as Olsen, there was much here to delight the mind and senses: olive groves and almond trees, the tinkling bells of goats and sheep in the surrounding farm yards, trays of seedy figs drying in the sun, the village with its stone-encircled 'playa' below. On 27 August 1958, he wrote in his journal:

> What luck to have found such a wonderful peasant's house...with an absolutely breath-taking view of the valley and terraced landscape. The house is surrounded by enormous sandstone mountains and a mile from here I can see the blue Mediterranean. The terracing is a very unique affair. Built by the Arabs it makes use of every square

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[146] John Olsen journal, 1958.

> inch of land. At night we hear the bubble and gurgle of water irrigating the crops. Because the mountains are so steep, everything has a corresponding intimacy - closeness which I must say is very compelling.

In Ibiza and Deya, Olsen worked for brief periods as an apprentice chef. Before he left Australia he was hard-pressed to boil an egg; by the time he returned he had developed a great admiration for the Mediterranean attitudes to food and wine - the great joy of preparing and sharing meals with feeling - which even when made with the simplest ingredients, had the potential to add to the richness of life; to the celebration of life. This sensibility would remain with him always and the subjects of food, and the paella in particular, would recur in his later paintings and drawings. In the first instance what he learned through sheer necessity was the ability to be resourceful, with the underlying principle that less can be more. It was in Deya, on the 11 October 1958, that the first of his many journal entries pertaining to food can be found amidst the notes on philosophy, poetry and art:

> Shopping is always a hazard in small Spanish towns, and one has to use a good deal of ingenuity to surmount the difficulty of what happens to be seasonal at that moment. In Deya during the summer good meat is difficult to obtain. Our friends introduced us to a butcher whose meat was enclosed in a large aviary-like cage...
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> I began reading books on Spanish cooking [and] noticed that most recipes could be made from a single source of fire. The aristocratic Paella is a good example of this...The food...is highly spiced with bay leaf, garlic and thyme...the despised garlic in English speaking countries is carried to the position of a primary spice. They cook green and red peppers in such a wide variety of manners - from delicious roasting, boiling, cunningly concealed in stews and spicy dishes and also succinctly stuffed.

From the time of his initial visit to the Balearic Islands, Olsen was impressed by the ability of many of the people he encountered to live simply but well, 'Knowing how to use a little is an art I have the profoundest admiration for'. He found a parallel with this idea in his reading of D.T. Suzuki's *Zen and Japanese Culture*, particularly in relation to the concept of 'wabi', which provided a means of integrating a spiritual dimension into everyday life.[147] He noted in his journal: 'When it is stated in terms of daily life, "Wabi" is to be satisfied with a little hut or room of one or two mats - like the cabin of Thoreau - and with a dish of vegetables picked from the neighbouring fields, and perhaps listening to the patterings of gentle spring rainfall'.

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147 D.T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Bollingen Foundation, New York and Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1973. First published in Japan in 1938 under the title: *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture*.

During this period Olsen's response to nature was continually reinforced through his interest in Eastern philosophy. Both Suzuki's text and Eugen Herigel's *Zen in the Art of Archery* provided a basis for developing a spontaneous and intuitive response in the painting process - to empathise with the processes in nature in thought and action, 'attuning the mind to the utmost fluidity or mobility, to acquire the spontaneity of natural growth'.[148] Herigel pointed out that the art of archery in relation to Zen Buddhism, did not refer to sporting but rather to spiritual exercises - a practical means of reaching the unconscious, which meant that in a spiritual sense, the marksman was aiming not only to hit the target but to hit himself.[149]

The work that most clearly demonstrates a greater reliance on a spontaneous and intuitive response is the drawing, *Majorca* (pl.19). The sense of integration of human experience with the natural world that Olsen was aiming for in *Bush Walk* and *Dylan's Country* is expressed much more directly in this vibrant work, making it a striking precursor of Olsen's work in the 1960s. It is a rare and remarkable work for the period. Compared with *Boys and a Bicycle*, the figures are liberated from their frontal, fixed positions in the space and have become dynamically imbedded in the landmass. Arms and legs extend directly from the heads, which in turn become interchangeable with fences and tracks.[150] Through the vigorous application of the wax crayon over the gouache background he builds up an impression of joyful participation in the landscape. The figurative imagery and overall conception give substance to the notion which he derived from T.S. Eliot, 'I am in the landscape and the landscape is in me'.

For Olsen life in Deya alternated between periods of concentrated work and Dionysian outbursts in his encounters with friends. The latter usually involved a steady flow of conversation, food and wine - in which his exuberant participation left him either exhilarated or exhausted. In the course of the late fifties a number of John Olsen's Australian friends had come to live in Majorca, including Paul and Jean Haefliger, who lived in Soller and later, Frank and Van Hodgkinson, who stayed in Deya. Van Hodgkinson recalls that by 1959 they were living about half a kilometre away from Olsen and used to meet at a cafe in the evenings. 'That was where the mail came in and it was a regular thing to sit on the balcony outside the

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148 John Olsen's journal, 1958.

149 Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1975.

150 Although Olsen does not feel that the CoBra group was a direct source for the work there are obvious affinities with the irrational, spontaneous imagery that can be found in these artists' works.

cafe looking straight down the valley to the beach.' They often shared argumentative lunches, dinners and moonlit picnics on the beach.[151]

While in Deya, Olsen became acquainted with one of the most renowned long-term foreign residents, Robert Graves. He recalls that he had read Graves's Claudian novels, but later wished that he had developed a deeper understanding of the author's poetry which he came to hold in great respect.[152] At that time Graves was working in film and his birthday parties used to draw friends and celebrities from around the world. Surely one of the most bizarre of these must have been in 1959 when John Olsen and Frank Hodgkinson decided to put on the play, *The Life and Death of Ned Kelly*, to celebrate the occasion. Several weeks went into the preparation of this event, with Dorothy, a visitor from New York, painting the sets and Hodgkinson taking the role of Ned Kelly. It was held in a grotto near the beach. 'No one really knew what it was about...There were about two hundred people... [and] after the event there was dancing and music because Graves's children were very musical. It was all rather marvellous.'[153]

Despite the fact that Deya was frequented by visitors from around the world, it had managed to retain aspects of its very old culture. This could be observed in the daily life of the peasant farmers and village people, and in the secular and religious fiestas and processions which Olsen later recalled in several paintings. The memories of these processions, of the movement of figures winding through the streets, of altars, symbolic forms and people melding into another, are found in paintings of the following year such as *The Procession* (see pl.24).[154] During Easter 1959 he described the Good Friday procession:

> On Thursday night we went to a Catalan painter's house which was situated in the Plaza. There was great excitement in all the village about the procession ...the slow clang! clang! of the bell, and as the priest and the altar boys and men carrying large heavily shrouded figures of Christ and the Virgin, bon fires were lit all round the hillsides. Penitents (tiny little men) with black peaked caps and then all the men and women each holding a candle walking in single file.

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151 Van Hodgkinson, interview with the author.

152 Olsen, *In Search of the Open Country 1961-1986*, op.cit., p.7.

153 Van Hodgkinson, interview with the author.

154 *The Procession* was inspired by religious processions that Olsen saw during Holy Week in Seville. However, the essential mood was, according to Olsen, much the same in the processions he witnessed in Deya.

John Olsen, Frank Hodgkinson and friends rehearsing their play,
'The Life and Death of Ned Kelly' for Robert Graves's birthday in 1959

During 1959 and 1960 Olsen was deliberately restricting his palette to darker earth tones and stark, dramatic contrasts, in an attempt to arrive at a feeling for the landscape, as well as what he saw as the 'emotive colouration' of Spain: of Goya and Zurbaran, of Picasso and the poetry of Lorca. Olsen was forcibly struck by the Spanish attitudes to death and by what Lorca wrote of as the *duende*; a powerful, mysterious and expressive force. Lorca perceived among the many manifestations of *duende* were 'the moon frozen heads which Zurbaran painted...the whole of Goya's work (and) the innumerable Good Friday ceremonies which, together with the most civilized spectacle of bullfighting, constitute the popular triumph of death in Spain. Of all the countries in the world, only Mexico can match Spain in this'.[155]

Olsen attended many bullfights in Spain and considered that while it represented a macabre spectacle to Anglo-Saxon sensibilities, one needed to attempt to enter into the spirit of Spanish culture to understand it. His response reveals another aspect of his personality which is occasionally glimpsed amidst his essentially life-affirming principles; that basic human nature is infinitely complex, that one has to take risks and should not 'expect the truth to be nicely sugared up'. Through his reading he perceived parallels with the Japanese Samurai where 'the ethic was higher than the form'. In his journal he wrote:

> The ethic of the bullfighter, who undertakes the greatest risks in the most artful manner risk life itself...the ethic of daring to die... completely becoming drawn to the bull, of one death and dying together...Like a dancer on a tightrope where one gasps with trepidation that a false step and life is gone forever...It is argued that the bullfight is not pleasant or even entertaining - of course not - great art never appeals immediately to us.

While the emotional temper of Spanish rituals would be distilled into stark colour contrasts in 1960 in works such as *Spanish Encounter* and *The Procession*; Olsen's use of brown-black earth tonalities in his paintings of 1959 was also an attempt to reach the 'fundamental forces of nature'. Works such as *Terassé* (pl.20) and *En Emergeant* reflect the heavily textured, symbolic surfaces of artists like Tapies, Saura, Canogar and Burri, referred to as the 'tachistes',[156] from the school of Barcelona and Madrid. *Terassé* painted over hessian and gesso, in its subtle shifts of tone and texture and intricately incised, myriad of lines, evokes 'associations of

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155 Federico Lorca, 'Theory and Function of Duende' in *Lorca*, ed. J.L. Gili, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1960, p.127.

156 The densely textured *Boys and Bicycle* suggests that Olsen may already have been familiar with their work in 1958.

nature's growth, age and decay'.[157] Some of the other more heavily encrusted works were less successful and Olsen soon abandoned this approach in favour of a more openly expressive, calligraphic line.

It was in *Granada* (pl.21), initially titled *Lorca's Country*, that Olsen most comprehensively achieved what he had been striving towards during the past few years. Here he creates a feeling of the pulse and movement of the earth, as the bold, undulating line circumnavigates and traverses the overall form. There is a sense of the mutability of the landscape, in its resemblance to a living organism like a giant amoeba. The fragmented mark-making and multiple viewpoints also suggest an aerial map of fields, paths and vegetation. In *Granada*, as in many of his later works, Olsen wanted to attain a sense of place through colour: 'The Spanish lineage does not explain itself in floral tributes, but in blacks, leather browns, blood like crimsons, chamois candle whites'.[158].

Wheels within wheels (fig.23) is less resolved but the emphatic, propulsive movement is relevant to his later work. Here it is attained through the bold, expressive calligraphic brushmark on the left, and the sweeping gestures above it which roll into the myriad of wheels upon wheels. This work together with *Granada*, as well as some of the more heavily textured paintings of 1959, were exhibited in May of the following year, in an one man exhibition at the Galerie Lambert in Paris.[159]

By the end of November 1959 John Olsen was making plans to return to Australia. His three years abroad had been most beneficial - the time he spent at 'Atelier 17', the exposure to a range of art and artists and his experience of a Mediterranean culture - all contributed to his future development. It also represented a period of continual struggle in his art, to discover where his own strengths and sense of direction lay. Paintings such as *Wheels within wheels* and *Granada* eventually began to provide vital signposts, opening the way for his work of the 1960s. Late in 1959, Olsen wrote in his journal:

> I used to worry a good deal about reaching a point of figuration quickly, then I understood that nature does not understand how it grows but grows and continues to grow silently, patiently - until

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157 Virginia Spate, *John Olsen*, Georgian House, Melbourne, 1963, p.8.

158 Olsen, *In Search of the Open Country 1961-1986*, op.cit., p.7.

159 This exhibition was arranged through the Australian branch of the Paris Congress of Cultural Freedom. Elwyn Lynn played a significant role in organising exhibitions through this group at the time.

fruition. Perhaps we are getting closer to nature when we begin working in this manner, putting something here and there, black, heavy - strange thing with a meaning I can't exactly say what...- and much to my surprise figuration is there like the Zen monks say, 'like a flash of lightning', without me even knowing.

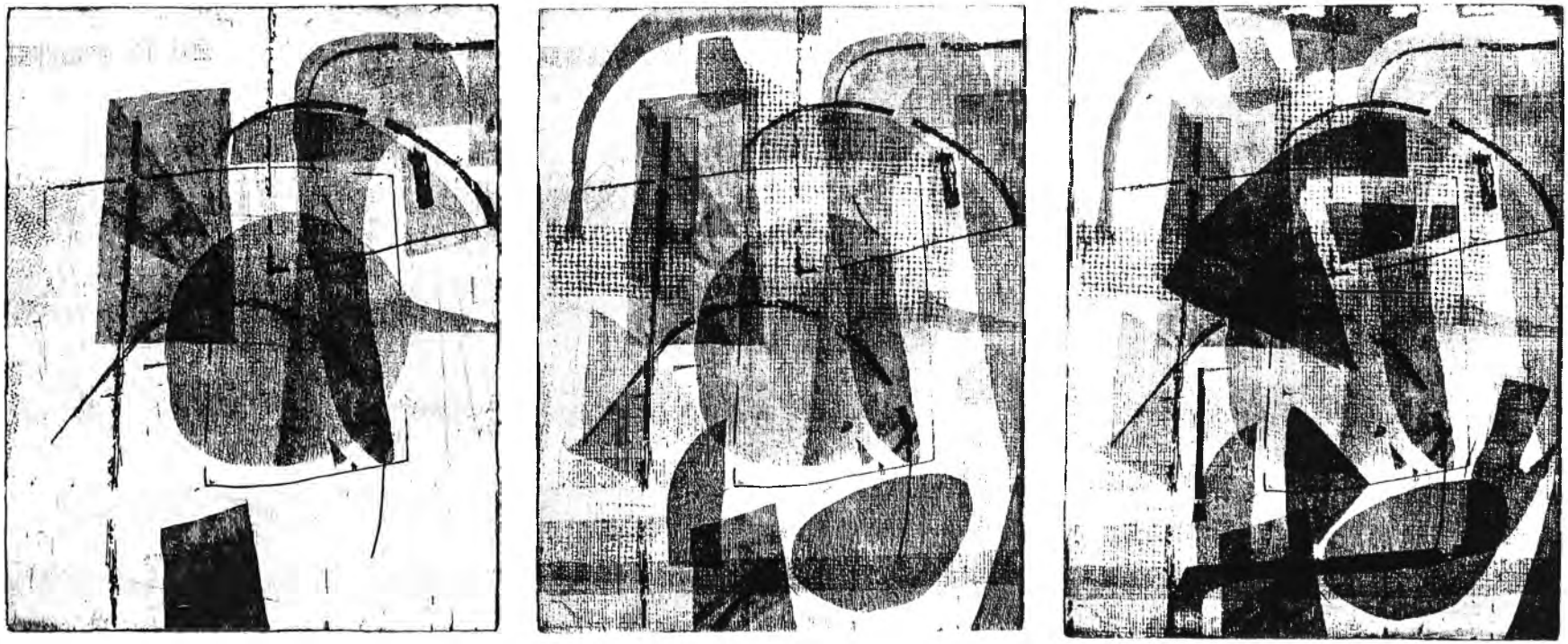


fig.19 *Studies at Hayters* 1957, etching and aquatint (three of five states), 19.5 x 15.1cm. Artist's proofs only. Collection: Australian Galleries

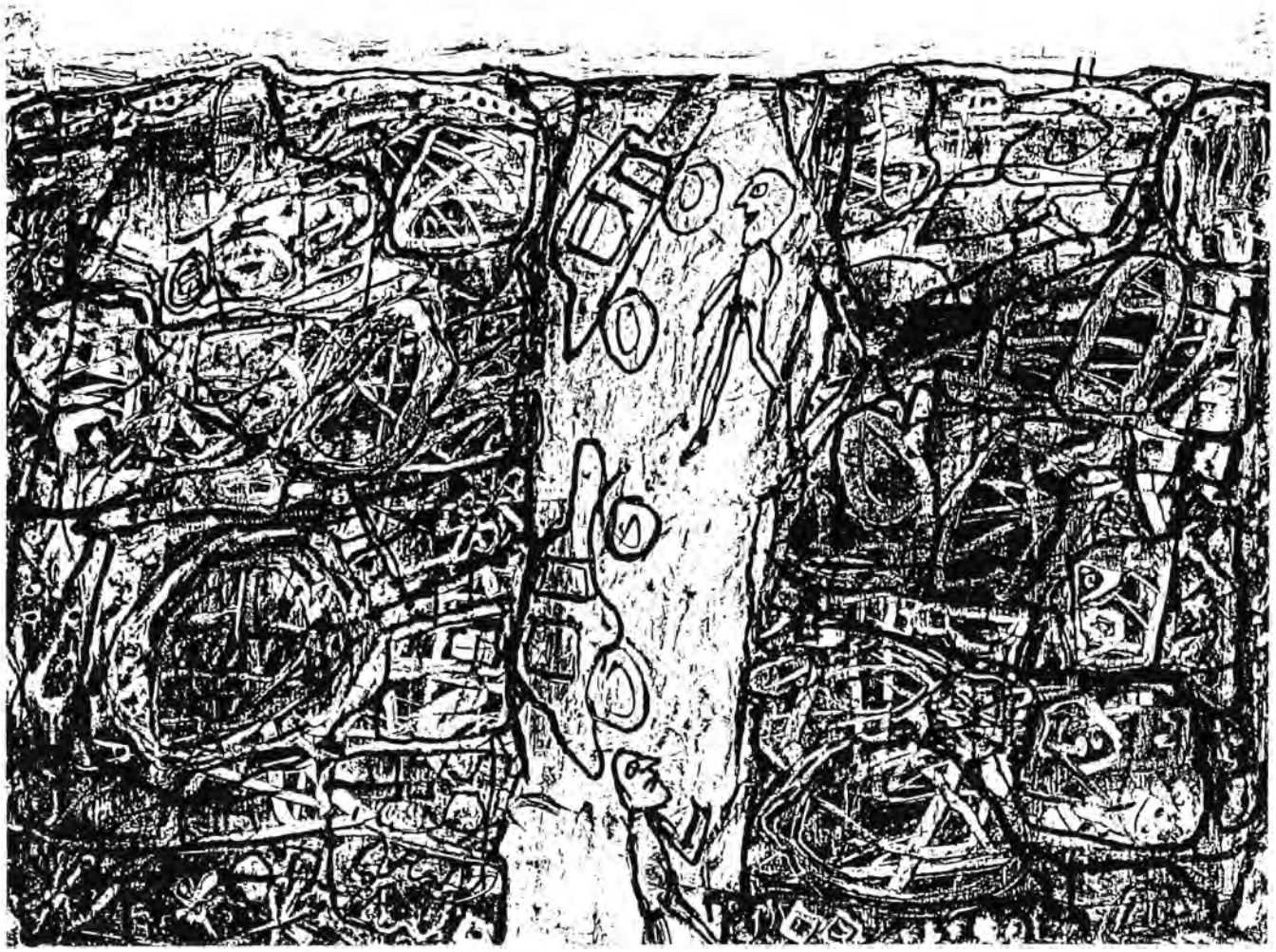


fig.20 Jean Dubuffet, *Bon Voyage* 1956, oil on canvas, 60 x 73cm
(illustrated in *Jean Dubuffet - Two Decades:1943-1962*, exhibition catalogue, pl. 30, see Bibliography)

fig.21 Karel Appel, *The Meeting* 1951, oil on canvas, 130 x 97.5cm
Collection: Rijkdienst Beeldende Kunst, The Hague, Netherlands
Such quirky, irrational imagery became a part of Olsen's work in the 1960s.

fig.22 Corneille, *Pierre et Fleurs* 1955, oil on canvas, 53 x 76cm
Collection: Stedelijk Museum, Schiedam, Netherlands

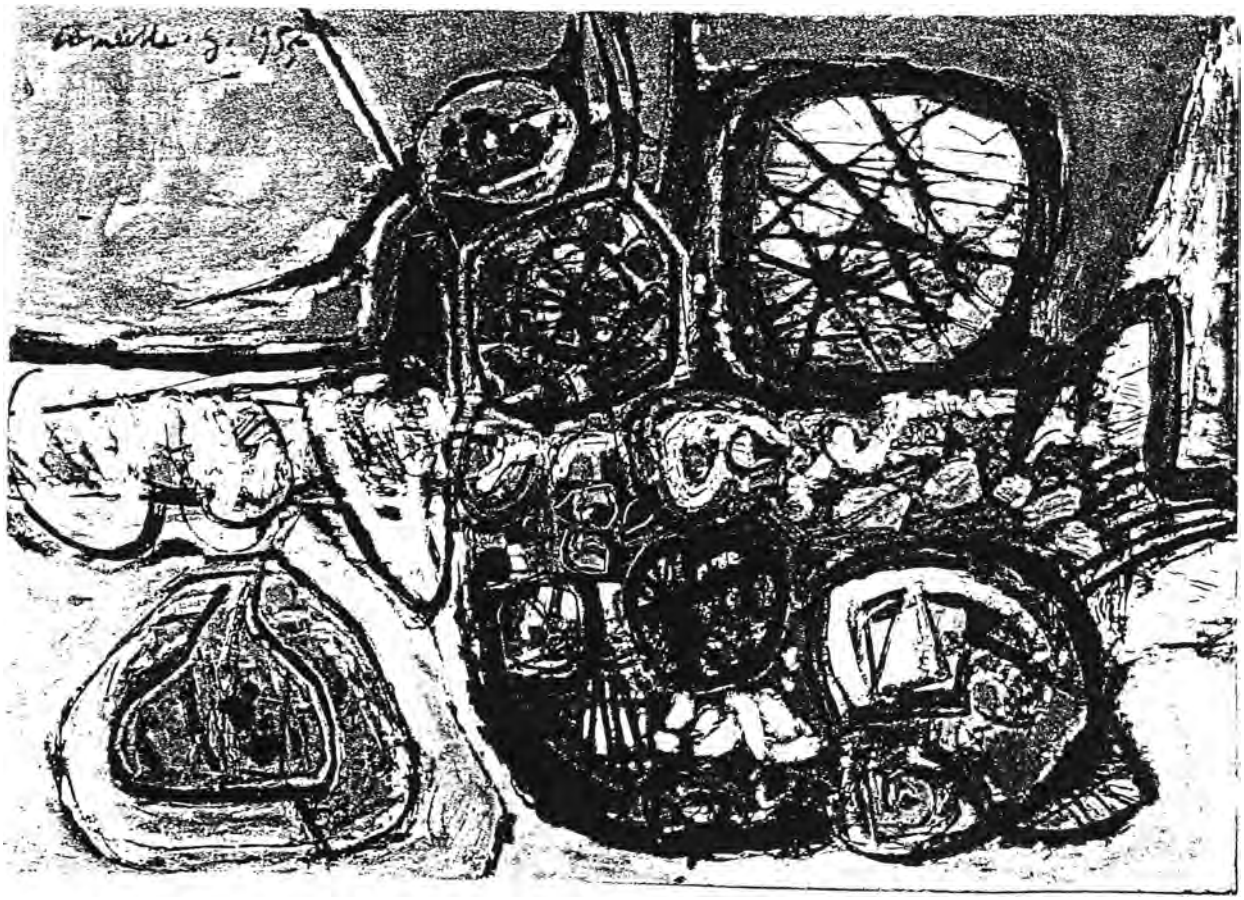
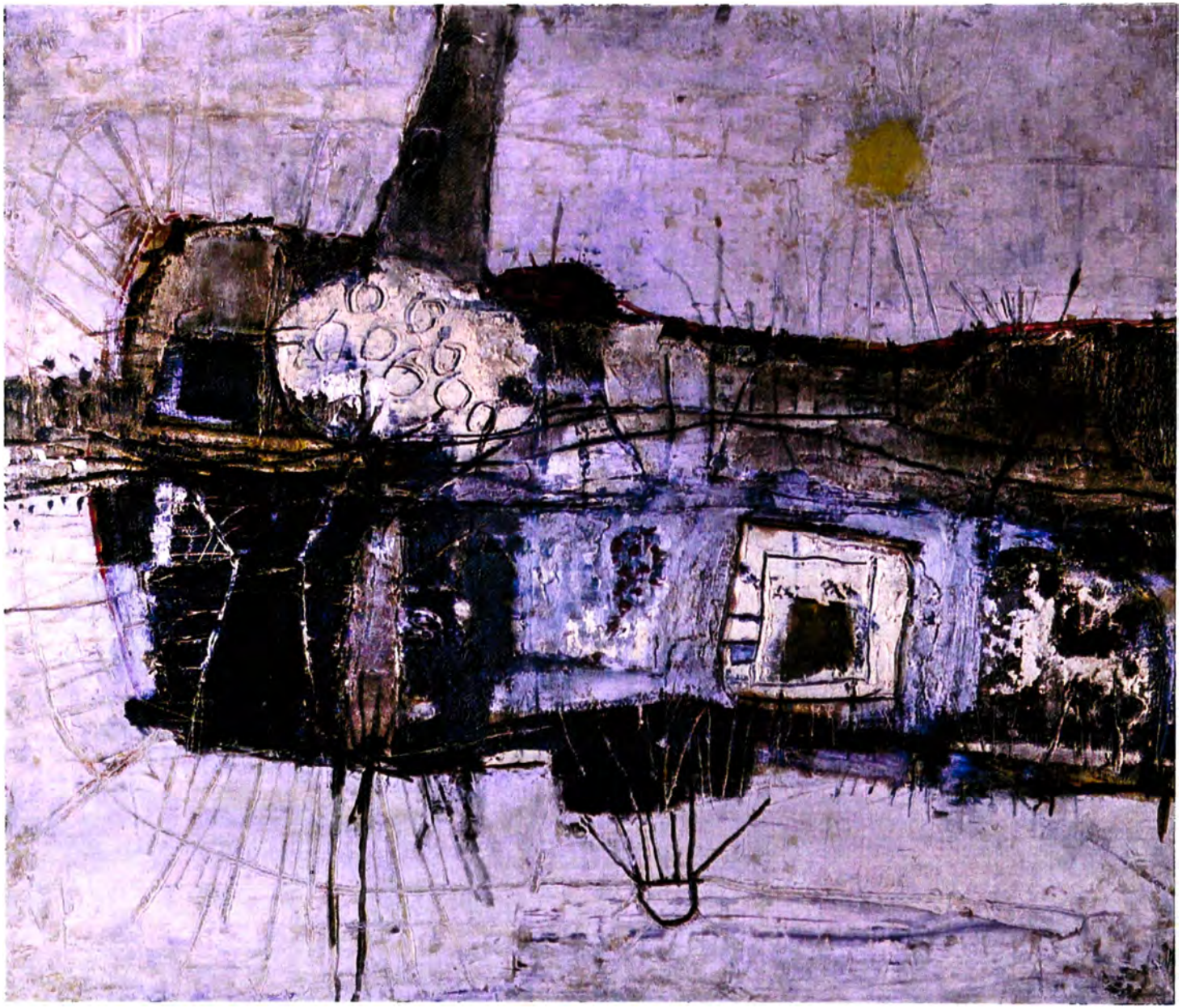
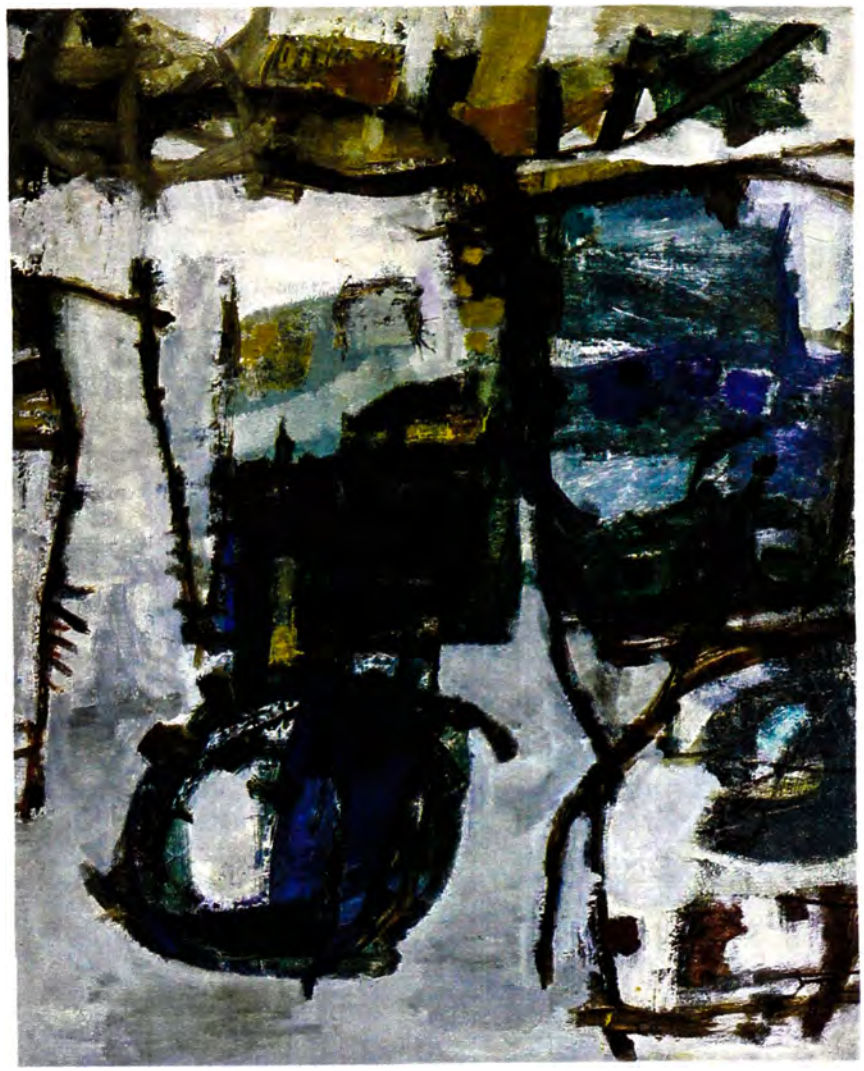


fig.23 ***Wheels within wheels***, 1959, oil on canvas, 100 x 119cm.
Collection: Mr and Mrs Charles Nodrum

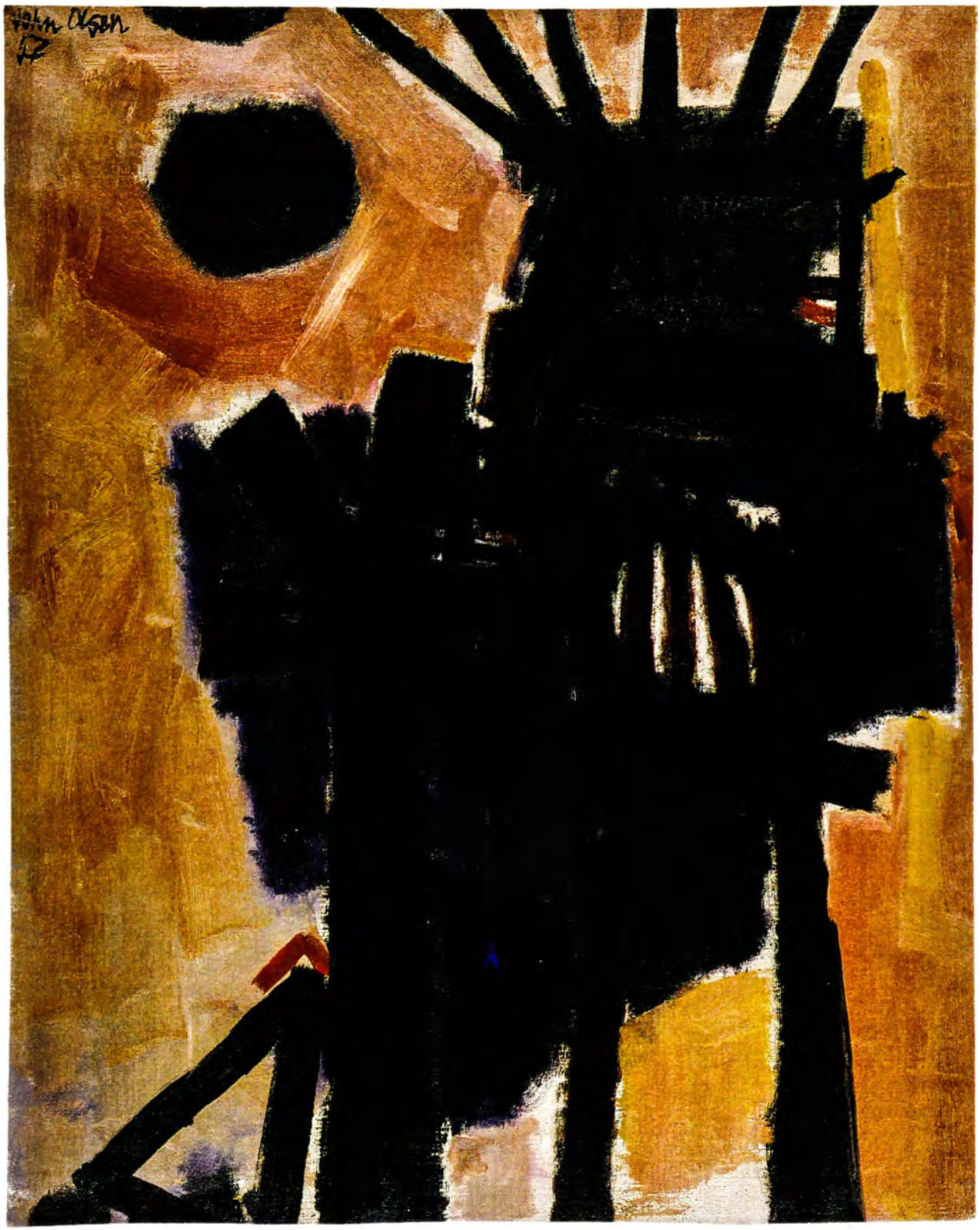


pl.14 *Landscape Mediterranean* 1957, oil on canvas on board, 54.5 x 65.5cm. La Trobe University Art Collection

pl.15 *Bush Walk* 1957, oil on canvas, 92.2 x 73cm
Collection: National Gallery of Australia



pl.16 *Dylan's Country* 1957, oil on canvas, 92 x 72.5cm
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales



pl.17 *Initiation No.2* 1957, oil on canvas, 93 x 73.2cm
Sussan Corporation Collection, Melbourne

pl.18 *Boys and Bicycle* 1958, oil on canvas on board, 88.9 x 69.8cm
Collection: James Fairfax

pl.19 *Majorca* 1958, pastel and watercolour on paper on board, 48 x 52cm
Collection: Dr. Jolly Koh

pl.20 *Terassé* 1959, oil on gesso on hessian board, 119.3 x 99.5cm
Private Collection

pl.21 *Granada* 1959, oil on canvas, 99 x 119cm. Collection: Dr. Joseph Brown

CHAPTER 5

RESOLUTION IN 'THE SIREN CITY OF THE RAT RACE' 1960 - 1964

> *Olsen created Sydney - its harbour, life, vulgarity, beauty and movement - in the way that Drysdale created the outback. His landscape teems with people, with traffic, stop-go signs flashing, pubs, drinkers, circuses, everything, seen not from one point of view but from all points of view and as though everything from morning till night was happening at once.*
>
> Laurie Thomas[160]

On his return to Australia in February 1960, John Olsen spent a few weeks in the country at Hill End and then moved to a small apartment at 109 Victoria Street, Potts Point, with a magnificent view of Sydney Harbour. After a three-year absence he was immensely stimulated by the 'magical vitality and incongruities of the place' which, in many ways, appeared dramatically different from an old Mediterranean culture. He was struck by the brightness of the light, the chaotic activity of the street life, and the fluxing tides and the voluptuous topography of the harbour connecting with the landforms and people, and in turn affected by them. In the ensuing period, in painting after painting, Olsen absorbed and transformed the pulse of the urban environment: vulgar, brash, dazzling, beautiful, rumbustious and alive. Sydney, city of contrasts; this was Olsen's 'buzzing honey pot', rich in possibilities, inviting participation.

The cumulative effects of his European experiences and his passionate response to the local environment resulted in the emergence of Olsen's distinctive means of expression. When works such as *Spanish Encounter*, *People who live in Victoria Street* and *Australian Flux* were first exhibited at Terry Clune Gallery in October 1960, their impact was revolutionary. Olsen's verve, inventiveness and technical assuredness quickly established his reputation as 'the most powerful and penetrating of the young painters in this country, amply fulfilling the promise that had been apparent since his earliest work'.[161]

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[160] Foreword by Laurie Thomas in John Olsen's *Salute to Five Bells*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1973 (unpaginated).
[161] James Gleeson, *Sun* (Sydney), 6 October 1960.

Paul Klee's maxim of 'taking the line for a holiday' became Olsen's talisman, transformed into his own robust calligraphy, propelled on a journey into an imaginatively reconstructed world of people, place and atmosphere. His works now abounded in figurative imagery fused into a topography of human emotions and experience. In the process of painting and drawing, Olsen wanted to bring together the multiplicity of things seen, felt and remembered into what he described as a 'totality of experience'. In the spirit of Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution*, he was rebelling against the fixities and rigidities which logicians and materialists ascribed to reality:

> The real facts of evolution were not to be found in the mechanical elimination of the unfit, but in the creative surge of life, in an *élan vital*. That propulsive life best known in the living of it, "bathing in the full stream of experience".[162]

For Olsen, the essence of painting was movement and flux. Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century developments such as the invention of the camera, the advent of air travel and Einstein's theories of relativity invited new modes of perception. In contrast to the Renaissance idea of fixed perspective, Olsen felt that all aspects of a scene could be conceived of simultaneously - near and far, the macrocosm and microcosm, assuming an equal significance on the picture plane. 'One thing the 20th century has taught me over and over again', Olsen later noted, 'is that it is an all at once world...It is like the artist's sensibilities have become the greatest shifting of focus we can imagine'.

In Europe he had been stimulated by a wide range of sources: the irrational imagery of Dubuffet, the CoBrA group and Miro; the archetypal forms in the work of Alan Davie; the sculptural architecture of Gaudi and the consecutive drawings in the Lascaux caves. With an increasing confidence and sense of direction in his own work, Olsen was now able to filter these impressions, which in turn became fused with his personal response to the Australian environment.

While on one level Olsen's works of the 1960s were principally aimed at capturing the spontaneity and vividness of his emotional involvement in the world around him, their resolution was only possible through a sound understanding of the formal aspects of painting, an understanding which had developed from the time of his early training. As Matisse said:

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[162] Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, Random House, New York, 1944. Olsen owned a copy of this book at the time.

> The painter who is just beginning thinks that he is painting from the heart. The artist who has completed this development also thinks that he is painting from the heart. Only the latter is right, because his training and discipline allow him to accept impulses from within, which he can in part control.[163]

John Olsen made a substantial contribution to Sydney in the early 1960s, not only in his work but also through his wholehearted participation in the artistic life of the city. Between 1960 and 1964 he taught at East Sydney Technical College, the University of New South Wales, and the Desiderius Orban and Mary White art schools. Many of his friends and former students found him an inspirational teacher and recall his tremendous energy and generosity. Colin Lanceley reminisces, 'I found him a very sympathetic and kindred spirit. The kind of things that he was talking about, that he had experienced, were the kind of things I was greedy for myself...I would have to say he was the most lively and vital personage that I had come across at that point'.[164]

The spirited mood of this period was very much informed by the sense of an artistic community. As in the mid-1950s, the terrace house in which Olsen lived also included the apartments of Bill Rose and other artists.

> Victoria Street was the hub of Sydney's art world...What a time it was. We were young and wanted to change the face of everything. Bill Rose, Clem Meadmore (always irritated that no one would buy his sculpture), Peter Upward (the handsome lover), Stan R. [Rapotec] in a terrace that overlooked the berthed ships in Woolloomooloo. Drysdale lived just around the corner...the introverted Passmore lived just above Drysdale. Clune Galleries was just next door...I painted some of my best pictures there.[165]

These artists and others, such as Leonard Hessing and Carl Plate, would often get together to share meals, ideas about art and philosophy, and 'the worst red wine imaginable'. Bill Rose recalls Olsen's sheep's head soups learned in Deya.[166] Olsen, in turn, remembers others cooking moussaka, and the spirit of iconoclastic good fun with which they drew up their own Surrealist map of Australia - in which Sydney had pride of place and Melbourne was a suburb of Sydney - with the major

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163 John Elderfield, *The Drawings of Matisse*, Thames & Hudson, London, published in association with the Arts Council of Great Britain and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1984, pp.20, 21.

164 Colin Lanceley, interview with the author.

165 John Olsen journal, 1986.

166 William Rose, interview with the author.

landmarks in both being the galleries and their favourite restaurants, coffee shops and pubs.

The young, loquacious art critic, Robert Hughes, was also closely associated with Olsen and the Victoria Street group. 'Our rapport began on meeting', Hughes recalled, 'although he was suspicious of me and I was scared of him; I was so anxious to impress this emissary from Europe that I pretended I had been to Barcelona and seen Gaudi, an imposture he detected at once'.[167] At that time Hughes was juggling various career options and earning a reputation as an 'enfant terrible', as parodied in a playful drawing Olsen did of him at the time.

One of the regular meeting places was Terry Clune Gallery in which Thelma Clune wanted to create an artists' club where the artists could come together in a relaxed and congenial atmosphere to discuss their work.[168] The gallery had been set up in a building in Macleay Street in 1957 by Thelma Clune, her son Terry and Frank McDonald. It was one of a number of commercial galleries that emerged in the late 1950s, heralding the resurgence of art patronage and support for the arts in the 1960s.[169] John Olsen held four major solo exhibitions there on a biennial basis from 1960 until 1967.

The monumental *Spanish Encounter* (pl. 23), 1960, painted in five hours one night at 109 Victoria Street, is widely considered to be a masterpiece both in Olsen's own output and in the history of Australian art. It was an emphatic statement; a release and a resolution of the previous years of struggle. The immediate impression is of raw, untamed energy, of the velocity of black line surging across white surface, colliding and connecting with a conglomeration of shapes in the process of metamorphosis. The raw, emotional tenor of *Spanish Encounter* is not achieved by great swathes of paint over the surface, but by focused, bold drawing with the brush that delineates archetypal, secular and bizarre images: a room, a light fitting, hybrid

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[167] Geoffrey Dutton, *The Innovators*, MacMillan, Melbourne, 1986, p.191.

[168] In an interview with the author Thelma Clune (just prior to her ninetieth birthday) recalled: 'I came to the gallery every day...My mother was ninety then and I used to bring her to the gallery. She used to make coffee for the artists. It was like a home away from home. They would all turn up and I would be making spaghetti because they wouldn't want to go and I wanted to keep them together. I would dole out whatever I could get going.'

[169] The late 1950s and early 1960s heralded what has been described as an art boom in Australia. There was a dramatic increase in the number of commercial galleries and art prizes. A number of these prizes were won by Olsen during the first half of the decade, including: the H.C. Richards Prize at the Queensland Art Gallery (for *Journey into the You Beaut Country No.2*) and the Perth Prize at the Art Gallery of Western Australia (for *Up and Down the Seaport*). The improved economic climate for the arts also encouraged more art publications, such as the monograph written on Olsen by Virginia Spate and published by Georgian House, Melbourne, 1963.

animals and birds, sexual imagery, faces, arrows, crosses and a bird-plane. In metaphorical terms this painting is the collision of Spain with Victoria Street. On one level the work reflects the fact that it was painted during a night when a woman friend would not visit and stay with him as she had remain at her own home to study - hence the references to the face attached to the desk on the left-hand side.[170] It was also obviously related to Olsen's memories of Spain - a distillation of what he perceived as the spectacles and stark contrasts of that country relayed through colour as symbol. He had grasped the potential of the speed of line to effect emotional response. *Spanish Encounter*, he later wrote, 'is an orgiastic, bull-rushing line'. In this dramatic painting he achieves a remarkable synthesis of vigour, intuitive spontaneity and control in delineating the forms. Bill Rose recalls the morning after it was painted:

> [Olsen] woke me up at eight in the morning and said, 'I haven't been to bed all night, give us a cup of coffee...I did a big painting all night and I think I've got it, I really think I have. Could you help me get it down and we'll nail it together...I walked up the stairs, if you can imagine up to the servant's quarters, and here were these three boards - six feet by four, the average [usual] size was four by three - it was huge. And I said, 'I know why you couldn't get into the bed, you can't get into the bloody room!'. We had to get them out and down the stairs and put them together. It was *Spanish Encounter*.[171]

This painting exerted a tremendous impact on many who saw it in 1960. Daniel Thomas, who had recently commenced working as a junior curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, recalls the great excitement of Tony Tuckson and others over *Spanish Encounter*. Tuckson, an artist, was also Assistant Director at the Art Gallery of New South Wales at the time, and was instrumental in the purchase of the work for the gallery.[172] For Robert Hughes it was an eye opener:

> It seemed enormous and so full of ambition and vitality that one... just breathed deeper in front of it. It had much the same effect on us, *mutatis mutandis*, that Les Demoiselles d'Avignon did on visitors to the Bateau Lavoir in 1907. But then the enthusiasms of small cenacles go high.[173]

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[170] This information from Olsen's journal does add an additional personal dimension to the work that amplifies the reading of the work in relation to its sexual references.
[171] Bill Rose, interview with the author.
[172] Daniel Thomas, interview with the author.
[173] Dutton, op. cit., p.191.

Although in 1960 his involvement in the Australian environment quickly took precedence over images related to Spain, Olsen painted several works based on memories of secular and religious rituals in Spain, such as *The Procession* (pl.24), again evoked through line, colour and archetypal images. In this work the dynamic movement is balanced by the formal, solid shape of the cart, providing a striking comparison with works painted over twenty years later such as *El Amoladar* and *Spanish black door* (see pls. 121 and 122).

The memory factor and the idea of compacting experience of past present and future, of things not only seen but felt and known, behind you, in front of you, around the corner, on the other side of the world, in your own backyard and down the street, is crucial to an understanding of John Olsen's work of the period. The ideas expressed in Henri Bergson's *Creative Evolution* continued to be an inspiration:

> My mental state as it advances on the road of time is continually swelling with the duration which it accumulates: it goes on increasing - rolling upon itself, as a snowball on the snow. Still more is the case with states more deeply internal, such as sensations, feelings and desires...Duration is the continuous progress of the past into the present which swells as it advances. And as the past grows without ceasing, so there is no limit to its preservation.[174]

The simultaneity of experience advocated by Bergson had been cited by the Italian Futurists in their emphasis on process and synthesising the manifold experiences of sense and memory. While Olsen shared in principle their interest in twentieth-century conceptions of time and space, dynamism and city life, he was far removed from their celebration of industrialism, their faceted structural frameworks and the declamatory nature of their manifestoes. By contrast, his works were organic, free-flowing and bound to a particular, regional feeling for place. In 1962 he wrote:

> It's morning in Victoria Street...I stop, walk back two paces for the sun is making the most gorgeous green through the plane trees and I find myself rolling with the sky - I am a little stunned by this and walk a little crooked on the footpath, a mongrel dog barks at me and my route becomes curved and quicker.
>
> I meet a friend - stop, pace back and forwards...shaking hands I must hurry, I want to cross the street - taxis float past and one stops and conks me on the mousetrap. Where I had in mind to walk a straight line I must walk round the cab in an angular fashion.[175]

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[174] Bergson, op. cit., pp.4 - 7.
[175] Notes supplied by Olsen to the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1960.

Although Olsen has related these memories to *Spanish Encounter*, the general atmosphere of sunny abandon in these passages and the imagery of crooked footpaths and mongrel dogs is in fact closer to the brightly coloured, tangled map of spidery, crisscrossing lines in *People who live in Victoria Street* (pl. 25). Aspects of this painting recall the directness of children's art, employed with an adult's awareness, understanding and experience. Olsen, like many twentieth-century artists such as Kandinsky, Klee and the CoBrA group, as well as Nolan and Perceval in Australia, [176] was attracted to child art and naive art. Such work represented a directness of vision or what Kandinsky termed the 'inner sound of the thing'. 'To get a spirit of innocence,' Olsen later wrote, 'to be a cunning child, is to have everything. Westerners strain too much - go, fall, be malleable'.[177]

In the early 1960s John Olsen was largely responsible for the resurgence of interest in irrational imagery in Sydney painting. His fusion of disparate images of the extraordinary and the mundane, and sense of irreverent humour, was greeted with great enthusiasm by artists such as Colin Lanceley, Ross Crowthall and Mike Brown, who formed the group known as the 'Annandale Imitation Realists'. For Lanceley, it provided a welcome alternative to much of the painting in Sydney which came under the aegis of abstract expressionism - 'all smoky and diffuse, no projection of anything at all'. Of seminal importance was Olsen's grasp of the life of the street in works such as *People who live in Victoria Street* and *McElhone Steps* (pl.38) where an array of demotic images were fused into a totality of experience. 'Its appeal for me', Lanceley commented, 'was that it seemed a very inventive approach to painting - it looked as though there could be an enormous vocabulary, a great fund of imagery to be discovered'.[178] The liberating effect of Olsen's art and teaching on Lanceley at the time can be gleaned from the younger artist's *Glad Family Picnic*, 1961 (fig.25).

During Olsen's absence from Australia in the late 1950s, there had been a strong move towards so-called abstract expressionism in Sydney. He admired the work of Upward (fig. 26) and Rapotec, which perhaps came closest to the broad definition

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[176] In a number of ways, John Olsen's work of this period provides a continuation of the romantic attitudes expressed in the work of Sidney Nolan and John Perceval in the 1940s. Perceval also explored the idea of all things being in a state of flux in images such as *Hornblower at Night*. See Robert Hughes, *The Art of Australia*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1986, pp.159, 160.

[177] *John Olsen's Notebook*, collected and arranged by T.J. Woodward, based on a series of workshops conducted by Olsen in 1969, 1975 and 1976 at the 'Grange', Campbell Town, Tasmania.

[178] *Colin Lanceley*, introduction by Robert Hughes and interview with Bill Wright, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1987, p.8.

of abstract expressionism, and shared their interest in Zen philosophy, automatism and an emotional response in the painting process. However the figurative emphasis and fantastic imagery in his work lay closer to the Surrealists, such as Joan Miro and André Masson. 'It must be remembered,' he commented, 'that the Americans got it from Europe...Masson, André Breton...not forgetting Picasso. I had thought of going to America, but I followed the European idea instead, of going to the source not to the periphery'.[179]

For Olsen, the substance of paint and the act of painting were never sufficient in themselves and he always believed that his work needed to be informed by a feeling for subject matter. Of all the American abstract expressionists he admired De Kooning, particularly his *Women* series, but his own painting had little in common with the central focal points and interlocking brushmarks of this artist's work. Olsen seldom employed broad slabs of paint or skeins of colour, but instead placed an emphasis on calligraphic drawing with the brush. This distinguishes even his most openly expressive and cathartic work such as *Spanish Encounter.* Olsen noted, 'as the Chinese would say, "it has bones in it"'. Moreover, his works of the 1960s were differentiated by their profusion of imagery and strong connection with the natural and urban environments – with a sense of place.

The experience of the natural world as a living, pulsating organism, begun in *Granada*, 1959, was taken further in *Diana's World*, *Digger Landscape* and *Australian Flux* (fig.27). In *Diana's World* the migration of the blue-black lines and figurative images occurs over the backdrop of the dark-brown landscape, which also resembles a human organ. The figures in *Australian Flux* are immersed in a state of ecstatic participation in the environment. Here, the legs of the one figure and the circular shapes like spinal nodules of the other are interchangeable with the myriad of marks and finely drawn lines of the fretted network of the environment.

The association with the local context in *Australian Flux* and *Digger Landscape* paved the way for the significant discoveries made the following year in the *You Beaut Country* series, in the inclusion of loutish figures and the rough, unkempt appearance of the landscape. At the time of Olsen's solo exhibition at Terry Clune Gallery in October 1960, Robert Hughes wrote in the *Nation*:

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179 John Olsen, *In Search of the Open Country 1961 - 1986*, Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, 1986, p.6.

> One of the most notable qualities of Olsen's art is its regionalism. Painfully, gracelessly sometimes, but with passion and intensity, it builds up its images of this particular time and place. It could have been produced I think, nowhere else...he distils more of the essence of landscape than any other Australian painter except Drysdale has done. At the moment of creation, Mr Olsen stands, as it were, within the landscape.[180]

In incorporating a sense of local identity, Olsen, whilst an innovator, was continuing the threads of an Australian tradition. The rows of dots over the landscape in his works have been compared with the 'characteristic rubbish-like open scatter of gum trees' in the works of John Glover, and with the interest in Aboriginal art and mark-making in the work of Margaret Preston.[181] On another level Olsen's notion of the 'honest vulgarity' of the Australian scene relates to the subjects of S.T. Gill's works[182] and also to his sense of this country having a Celtic memory, which he detected in Nolan's work of the 1940s. He commented, 'It is a kind of larrikinism against authority and it is found in Ned Kelly's last words, "Here's luck". It's very Australian and it comes from the Irish. If it's picked up it can be found in the *You Beaut Country* series'.[183]

Olsen's ideas about an Australian ethos, like the works themselves, were varied and cumulative. The sense of vitality and robustness was informed by an urban consciousness, by the attitudes of the people to their environment, and by the larrikin life he encountered in Sydney pubs and the Australian vernacular. 'I noticed', Olsen said, 'that Australians were saying that Leonardo can be beaut, a trip in a car can be beaut, an ice cream can be beaut, and really it's a corruption of the beautiful'. This amounted to a bizarre aesthetic, in which he recognised that an important ingredient in Australian society was its vulgarity. 'I feel it is something one would ignore very much at one's peril. It is a pretty bitter pill to take but if you miss it you miss a lot. Let life as a totality come into your painting.'[184]

The concept of the *You Beaut Country* so captivated the public imagination, as well as other artists and critics during the ensuing period that it was used as a catch-phrase synonymous with Olsen's personality, work and philosophical approach in general. By 1963, reviews of exhibitions (even those which did not include any of

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180 *Nation*, 8 October 1960.
181 Daniel Thomas, *Sunday Telegraph* (Sydney), 12 May 1963.
182 Gary Catalano, *The Years of Hope: Australian Art and Criticism 1959 - 1968*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1981, p.46.
183 While stylistically the works are quite different there is a direct link with Nolan's sense of the absurd and irrational, sometimes ironic humour that informs a feeling for place in Olsen's work.
184 Gavin Souter, 'Modern Art in Sydney (2)', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 June 1962.

the *You Beaut Country* paintings) were variously headed 'You Beaut on Canvas' or 'The Beaut World of John Olsen'. The main works in the series are: *Journey into the You Beaut Country No.1* and *No.2* (pl.26 and pl.27), *Spring in the You Beaut Country* (pl.28), *Summer in the You Beaut Country* (pl.29) and *People who live in the You Beaut Country* (pl.33). While the two ceiling paintings *Summer in the you Beaut Country No.1* and *No.2* are connected, they need to be viewed independently because of the nature of the commissions and the demands of painting directly onto the ceiling.

In the first instance, the idea did not occur to Olsen as a consciously planned strategy, but rather, was discovered as the forms, brushstrokes and images emerged and overlapped in the painting process. *Journey into the You Beaut Country No.1* and *No.2* were exploratory, painterly journeys into landscapes of memory, imagination and a general feeling for the Australian environment. On these journeys of movement, flux and change the viewer is encouraged to be an active participant, a fellow traveller into a world of the unexpected.

> I'm inviting you to come with me on this journey of...strange and weird happenings...The *You Beaut Country* is a world of the irrational...that we can never exactly premeditate where it is going to lead us...just like life.[185]

Journey into the You Beaut Country No.2 is one of the most resolved works in the series, successfully transforming a range of ideas into a world that is both fantastic and grounded in a feeling for place. Here one is struck by the physicality of the paint surface and surreal imagery: breasts, male genitalia, larrikin heads and a variety of hand shapes grafted onto the body of the landscape. Olsen was attempting to convey the feeling of an imaginative experience of the landscape, of being part of the landscape mentally, emotionally and physically. For him, the essence of painting was movement; 'sometimes the images aren't completed, because you're moving too fast for it'. The richness of the mark-making suggests at one and the same time an array of muddy tracks, a lizard skin and the bark of a tree.[186] The striations and dots, as well as the handprints imbedded in the landscape, convey Olsen's long-held admiration for Aboriginal art. He particularly admired bark paintings and cave art, on the basis of drawing and the animistic response to the land, 'magnificently charged with the mystic of the Australian landscape and its creatures'. [187]

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[185] Olsen, interview with Hazel de Berg, 1964.
[186] See also Betty Churcher, *Understanding Art*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1973.
[187] Olsen, *Salute to Five Bells*, op. cit., unpaginated.

Olsen did not want his *You Beaut Country* series to be a celebration of the Australian ethos as much as a 'totality of experience'. As was pointed out at the time, to see these works as no more than ebulliently discursive good humour is to miss the point of the irrational imagery.[188] Virginia Spate wrote:

> Here Klee's wit is transformed into Rabelasian laughter. Yet for all its laughter, one recognises that the painting is a serious thing...
>
> It is a wild joy...it has an intensity that disturbs and threatens... Dubuffet meant the same thing and could have been writing about *Journey into the You Beaut Country* when he wrote, 'Art must make you laugh a little and make you a little afraid'.[189]

Spring in the You Beaut Country is intimately related to *Journey into the You Beaut Country No.2* in its neutral palette of browns, ochres and warm, matt yellows. Once again the paint application is both sensual and robust, spawning a range of zany images. The forms extend from a flowing earth-coloured river which, in its spine-like axis and flowering imagery, refers back to *Spring* (fig.29) of the previous year. From the mid-1950s Olsen had been captivated by Paul Klee's notion that 'forming is a growing, developing process like a plant or a living organism' and he was now able to apply these ideas with much greater assurance to his work. The sense, in Olsen's work, of the burgeoning growth in the natural world and in the imagination, finds a striking parallel with Klee's comments:

> Fantastic and grotesque, nature, with its infinite variety of blooms and the ecstatic call of sexual manifestations, was still richer than man's wildest imaginings. And underlying everything, there was always a subtle yet strict law of creation according to which these formations developed in themselves and through the generation of their species...confronted by such things it is only natural to wish to obtain the same creative freedom.[190]

Olsen's interest in fantastic, metamorphic imagery was also stimulated by Pacific and Melanesian sculpture. Like many artists at the time, he owned a large, wooden Sepik carving. He admired the interchangeable nature of its forms, where the head of a man could also become the head of a bird. The disparate, hybrid images of human, animal and vegetal forms which flow into one another in works such as *Journey into the You Beaut Country No.1* and *Blue Orpheus* (pl.30) are organically

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188 Robert Hughes, 'The Irrational in Australian Art', *Art and Australia*, vol.1, no.3, Nov. 1963.
189 Virginia Spate, *John Olsen*, Georgian House, Melbourne, 1963, p.13.
190 Werner Haftman, *The Mind and Work of Paul Klee*, Faber, London, 1954, p.30.

united with the land and seascapes. In Classical mythology, Orpheus charmed not only the wild beasts but also the trees and the rocks, which would come after him at the sound of his lyre. Like Dionysus, he was purported to have an intimate understanding of the plant and animal worlds and to be initiated into their secrets.

Both of these works were included in the Melbourne component of the '9 Sydney'[191] exhibition. This show opened at David Jones Gallery in July 1961 and at Gallery A in Melbourne in August – September of the same year. The exhibition was initiated by Olsen and Leonard Hessing, and also included works by Upward, Rapotec, Carl Plate, Eric Smith, William Rose, Hector Gilliland and Clement Meadmore. Virginia Spate wrote in the catalogue introduction to the Melbourne exhibition:

> The first exhibition of these nine artists in Sydney last month was regarded as a significant event. It will remain to be seen whether it will prove to be so in Melbourne, where, of course the debate on the "image" continues.

The debate on the image referred to the well-known Antipodean Manifesto, which had been formulated in Melbourne in 1959. The Antipodeans included the art historian, Bernard Smith, and Melbourne artists Charles Blackman, David Boyd, Arthur Boyd, John Brack, John Perceval and Clifton Pugh, with one additional Sydney artist, Robert Dickerson. Bernard Smith and David Boyd were the major forces behind the formation of the group. Smith was responsible for the preparation of the manifesto, based on his own views, as well as discussions and written statements provided by some of its members.[192] The Antipodean Manifesto was both a virulent defence of 'the image' and an attempt to formulate the role of artists in society.

Although the manifesto claimed that the members of the group were part of the modern movement, it proceeded to reject the majority of significant twentieth-century movements: 'Today tachistes, action painters, geometric abstractionists, abstract expressionists and their innumerable band of camp followers threaten to benumb the intellect and wit of art with their bland and pretentious mysteries'. It went on to claim that in non-figurative art, 'We are witnessing yet another attempt to

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191 This was the original title of the exhibition 'Nine Sydney Artists' which has become known as 'Sydney 9'.

192 See also Bernard Smith, *The Critic as Advocate: Selected Essays 1941 - 1988*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1989, pp.135-147.

reduce the living speech of art to the silence of decoration...' and that 'Dada is dead as a dodo'.[193]

While the fundamental concerns about the image and apparent loss of subject matter were widely debated by many at the time, the dogmatic tone and exclusive nature of the document made it untenable for many, including several members of the group itself, who chose to distance themselves from it soon after it was written. Olsen and a number of the Victoria Street group felt that certain basic artistic freedoms had been compromised and that Sydney art had been misconstrued. Despite the stylistic inconsistencies in the works in the '9 Sydney' exhibition, these artists wanted to convey that what was of central importance was not the question of abstraction but, as Spate put it in the catalogue, 'the sense of urgency of the individual adventure-to-form'. Although there were various motivating factors for the exhibition,[194] Olsen recalls that it was also related to their discussions about the manifesto:

> 'Sydney 9' was a response to the manifesto but also we felt misrepresented...The Antipodeans had raised a polemic which was incorrect. You know, I thought, 'Rapotec's *Meditation on Good Friday* is the figuration of an emotional state - it is extremely valid. Are we going to stop the whole thing?'. There was Upward's calligraphy...which was very spirited and had a lot of panache and style in it...Meadmore's sculptures were strong. It was a necessary demonstration of what we were doing.[195]

Due to the inclusion of only one Sydney artist in the manifesto, it was interpreted by many at the time as a Melbourne-versus-Sydney, figuration-versus-abstraction conflict. Robert Hughes wrote theatrically: 'A ludicrous tension now existed between the "abs" and "figs". Shrieks of "international bandwagoners!" and "cottage industry!" were exchanged north and south across a mutually observed Mason-Dixon line that painters seldom and exhibitions rarely crossed...'[196]

While at the time there was an evangelical quality on both sides of the debate, a close study of the period reveals that the 'Mason-Dixon line' was a fallacy. John Olsen, for one, admired many Melbourne artists including Arthur Boyd, Perceval and Pugh, and the feelings were reciprocated. Artists from both States often visited and

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[193] Bernard Smith, *The Death of the Artist as Hero*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1988, p.194.
[194] Among the motivating factors was a desire to raise commercial gallery standards in Australia. See also Spate, op.cit.
[195] Olsen, interview with the author.
[196] Hughes, *The Art of Australia*, op.cit., p.294.

stayed with one another and discussed their work. Furthermore, abstraction was by no means exclusive to Sydney as, for example, the work of Roger Kemp and Leonard French demonstrated.

The fluid boundaries between figuration and an abstract conception were perhaps nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in John Olsen's art and teaching in the early 1960s. In September of 1959 John Passmore had been awarded the Helena Rubinstein Travelling Art Scholarship and in March the following year, on sailing day, he ceremonially handed over his students from East Sydney Technical College to his 'favourite protegé', John Olsen. Valerie Olsen (then Strong) recalls her initial impressions:

> We first met when we went to see John Passmore off...I can remember saying to him, 'Who do you think is the most important painter at the moment?', and he said, 'Tapies'. We hadn't really heard of Tapies, but we pretended we had...With Passmore we had been indoctrinated with Cézanne. He used to keep us in the dark a bit because he liked things to be a mystery...And John [Olsen] came to take our class...He was a very stimulating teacher and very dashing in his Spanish clothes...John Passmore and Paul Haefliger used to call him Olly, and we used to call him 'Olé' - straight back from Spain.[197]

East Sydney Technical College was then run by Douglas Dundas and despite moves towards abstraction and abstract expressionism in Sydney, the prevailing orthodoxy at the college was very much a 'Dundas-Passmore version of Cézanne'. Colin Lanceley, who was a student there at the time, recalls that until Olsen's arrival, there was the feeling that abstract painting was really going too far:

> Post-Impressionism was considered about as far as modern painting should go...when John came back we had this two-hour class called 'abstract painting'...It became less of a formal class and more a kind of discussion, a kind of Salon, which I think was very helpful and probably its proper role as abstract painting as an animal didn't have any existence at the college. He released my creative forces.[198]

Olsen brought to his classes an understanding of contemporary art and a considerable knowledge of art history. His feeling for the 'Mediterranean spirit' and his ability as a raconteur are remembered by a number of former students and

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[197] Valerie Olsen, interview with the author. Although Olsen held the Spanish painter, Tapies, in high regard, any direct connection with this artist's textured surfaces was restricted to the works of 1959.

[198] Colin Lanceley, interview with the author.

friends. Lanceley and Ann Thomson (also a student at East Sydney) recall lively get-togethers aided by the flow of wine and other alcoholic beverages. During these years Olsen meant different things to different people. Peter Powditch remembers the serious but also very electric atmosphere that Olsen was able to create during his classes at the Orban Art School.

Olsen believed in the importance, in the early stages of an artist's training, of providing a solid base in painting and drawing, starting with the figure and still life. 'The basis to the classes was Cézanne and Matisse', recalls Powditch. 'He taught traditionally, with expression at the same time. He demanded a serious commitment and it was very difficult to walk up the stairs to his class, initially'. Once his students had begun to progress, Olsen encouraged them to both discover their own strengths and to extend themselves beyond what they already knew. Powditch continues:

> One night...he picked up a pitcher of water and splashed it on the floor. He said, 'There is more expression in that than anything here'. We were devastated, but those kinds of things are very memorable... I remember him once saying to me, 'Peter, you're afraid of being ordinary. If you could paint an ordinary picture it would be extraordinary'. That is probably limited but they were the sorts of things you couldn't get from other artists.
>
> It wasn't just being free and it wasn't terribly abstract, but it was an abstract way of thinking - looking at negative shapes...If a drawing needed more weight here and didn't need it over there, that one leg could be shorter than another. I just took off because I could suddenly see the reasons for doing things.[199]

In relation to the discussions about abstraction and figuration it is interesting to compare John Olsen's Sydney harbour paintings of the 1960s with the grid-like structures of his seaport paintings of the mid-1950s. He was now able to express his affection for the harbour in a much more organic and empathetic way - in terms of the flux of its tides connecting with the city and its people and in turn affected by them. What Olsen had been striving for in the 1950s was realised in the 1960s: a more figurative emphasis while retaining an abstract conception - looking at nature from multiple viewpoints and fusing images together - which allowed him to 'increase the dimension of nature's metaphors'.[200]

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[199] Peter Powditch, interview with the author.
[200] Olsen, *Salute to Five Bells*, op.cit.

One of the most remarkable harbour paintings of the early 1960s is *Up and Down the Seaport* (pl.31) where the rhythms of the undulating tides are captured in the sensuous physicality of the paint surface. Here the bold, rhythmical application of dark green and vivid blue serpentine brushmarks travel in a vertical axis up and down the surface, over the creamy whites and pale yellows. The painting is given a fantastic dimension in the quirky figurative elements and the black outline of a menacing, pincer-like claw in the centre. For all its apparent rawness and spontaneity, this work clearly demonstrates Olsen's strong aesthetic sensibilities: his sensitivity to colour and form, and his deftness and surety of touch.

Olsen had been immensely stimulated in the 1950s by Dylan Thomas's play *Under Milk Wood*, in which multiple, interconnecting sequences evolve into a total impression of the Welsh seaport of Llareggub. Olsen was now able to discover parallels with Thomas's cumulative vision of human experience, absurd humour and array of characters in his own seaport of Sydney. Paintings like *Portrait Landscape No. 2* (pl.32) and *People who live in the You Beaut Country* (pl.33) are filled with narrative incidents: figures and faces wearing hats, smoking cigarettes, riding bicycles, inhabiting the edges of loosely slung landscapes. Bizarre, interchangeable elements occur: the landscape becomes a bird, the girl's bright red lipsticked lips appear on her cheek, the nose is also a necktie and the forehead a window. As in many of Olsen's urban environments, clocks and wrist watches appear. These add to the feeling of people in a hurry, but are usually set at different times, creating the sense of irrational humour also found in Thomas's characters:

> Lord Cut-Glass, in his kitchen full of time...listens to the voices of his sixty-six clocks...slow clocks, quick clocks...clocks with no hands for ever drumming out time without ever knowing what time it is. His sixty-six singers are all set at different hours...Sixty-six different times in his fish-slimy kitchen ping, strike, tick, chime, and tock.[201]

John Olsen developed a fascination with narrative and has often been considered the best story-teller in town. However he is not a literary painter in the conventional sense; above all he is inspired by poetic, suggestive imagery. His narratives are open-ended and his aim is to reach the essence or the spirit of the ideas expressed. For him they are a starting point from which his own ideas and sensibilities are

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201 Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood*, J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., London, 1965.

allowed to unravel in accordance with the demands of the painterly medium. As he said, 'the story is the beginning of the conclusion'.[202]

In April 1961 John Olsen had married Valerie Strong and moved from his studio in Victoria Street to Paddington. In May of the following year their son Timothy was born. During this period their house was 'like Grand Central Railway station'. Olsen was writing for the press and for *Art and Australia* and frequently doing interviews. He also devoted considerable time to his teaching. Many fellow artists and former students recall that he was constantly giving out energy and enthusiasm. 'It was as though he carried the whole of Sydney's enthusiasm on his own shoulders. He was generous to an extreme, he gave himself.'[203]

The outgoing, vaudevillian sides of his personality were well known around the city, particularly in the pubs where artists used to gather, such as the Windsor Castle. While on one level it was an exhilarating time, Olsen recognised the implicit danger of constantly dispersing his energies; of the potency of the razzle dazzle of the city combined with his own gregarious personality. In a revealing interview in 1962 he said, 'I have to save myself from myself'.[204] What followed was a period of temporary respite.

Early in September 1962, John and Valerie Olsen and their three-month-old son moved to Paul Haefliger's wattle and daub house at Hill End. Although Olsen only stayed there for a few months and despite the fact that the resultant works are of variable quality, it was a significant period because it signalled what was to become a dominant aspect of his work from the late 1960s – working directly from the rural and bush landscape. Hill End, which had been a thriving gold-mining town in the 1860s and 1870s, had been 'rediscovered' by Donald Friend and Russell Drysdale in 1947 who, like Olsen, had been looking for a place of escape from the city. The presence of these artists as well as the subjects of their paintings and drawings had attracted others, including Margaret Olley and Brett Whiteley. About a month after Olsen's arrival, a number of Sydney painters came to visit and enjoy the country atmosphere. For a short while he enjoyed a sense of calm and tranquillity. Referring to the title of Friend's account of his time there, Olsen wrote:

> All's well in 'Hillendiana' - I have managed to begin work almost immediately and I must say it's glorious to work without interruption

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202 Nancy Kasprzycki, 'The Man Who Loves Pictures: A Portrait of John Olsen', unpublished article.
203 Virginia Glover, interview with the author.
204 John Hetherington, *Age*, 15 September 1962.

> ...It's marvellous to be in the landscape, yesterday we had a picnic out in the country surrounded by whiteish [sic] ghost gums - deserted mine diggings all around...The rhythm of life is very similar to Spain - bread 3 times a week, meat twice - vegitables [sic] only what's grown locally.[205]

Olsen's depiction of the landscape was quite different from those of Drysdale or Friend. He was not so much interested in the relation of the dwellings in the town to the land, but rather, focused directly on the imprints left by the miners on the countryside a century before - in the slag heaps, tunnels and deep gorges; in the clay banks of the Turon River. The paintings, in their largely neutral brown, black and grey colouration and calligraphic manipulation of line which 'writes the landscape', find a parallel with Ian Fairweather.[206] Olsen's feeling for growth in nature persists, particularly in works like *Creek Bed, Hill End* (pl.34), where roots and tuber-like shapes appear to be pushing upwards from the deeply layered earth.

By the start of 1963, Olsen and his family had moved to a house belonging to the Clunes in the lush, dairy-farming country of Yarramalong (between Sydney and Newcastle). 'It was a rather beautiful tumble-down place', Olsen recalls, '[with] very lovely sorts of smells...and the trees were all around the verandah of the house'. It was on this verandah that he painted some of his most lyrical evocations of the natural environment. This period marked the beginning of his preoccupation with the mottled, dappled quality of the light and the landscape itself, which provided a connection with what became an enduring passion - Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem titled *Pied Beauty*:

> *Glory be to God for dappled things -*
> *For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;*
> *For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;*
> *Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches wings;*
> *Landscape plotted and pieced - fold, fallow and plough;*
> *And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.*
>
> *All things counter, original, spare, strange;*
> *Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)*
> *With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;*
> *He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:*
> *Praise him.*[207]

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205 Letter to Thelma Clune, September 1961.

206 After winning the H.C. Richards Prize at the Queensland Art Gallery in November 1961, John Olsen visited Ian Fairweather at his hut on Bribie Island. He was immensely impressed by Fairweather's grasp of Oriental calligraphy and ideographic imagery. Olsen also shared Fairweather's view that 'pure abstraction was throwing the baby out with the bathwater'.

207 *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, selected with an introduction and notes by W.H. Gardner, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1961, p.30.

Olsen responded to Hopkins's deeply felt sense of grace in nature and the fluid, running, fecundating power of his imagery. In *Dappled Country*, the subtle, tonal variations of grey-greens and browns and the tangled mass of twisting lines and shapes suggest the mutability of the landscape and its creatures, the variousness of its growth forms, and the stippling effects of light and shade. In the aftermath of summer, 'roots burrow, insects scurry, and fruit trees push their way up from the dark soil' in this animistic expression of total involvement with the landscape.[208]

In *Tree of life* (pl.36) the composition, with its central axis festooned with all manner of creatures, birds and vegetal forms, relates back to *Spring in the You Beaut Country*, 1961. Wallace Thornton detected in this work 'more solid painterly depths and richness of tone', suggestive of intimate contact with the landscape.[209] The visual elaboration is also more complex and interwoven, recalling Olsen's interest in illuminated manuscripts, particularly the Book of Kells. Frank Mcdonald recalls visiting Olsen at Yarramalong with Sandra McGrath soon after *Tree of life* was painted: 'We took it out under the moonlight and rejoiced in it. It was just so magical'. This work won the Georges Prize in Melbourne in May 1963, with Fred Williams's *You Yangs* receiving second prize. Alan McCulloch believed that Olsen's painting was the superior work,[210] while Daniel Thomas felt that both works had independent strengths. Thomas's comments are particularly relevant in relation to subsequent assessments of these two artists' works:

> Although it received second prize it is really impossible to compare [Williams's] works with Olsen's. They share something of their subject matter, but they stand for temperamental opposites, the classical and the romantic, the orderly and the disorderly, the intense single experience as opposed to the gluttonous appetite for the totality of experience. One cannot say they are better or worse than each other, but only that they are different, and equally profound ways, of saying something about Australian nature.[211]

Although *Tree of life* was seen to be fully expressive of his personal range of imagery, the pendulum of Olsen's iconography in 1963 again began to swing back to the urban environment. During this period he was in and out of the city on regular visits. *Half Past Six at the Fitzroy* (pl.37), like *6.30, The Rose and Crown* explored an ongoing source of inspiration: the regulars and rituals of Sydney pub

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208 See Hughes, *The Art of Australia*, op.cit.
209 *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 March 1963.
210 *Herald* (Melbourne), 8 May 1963.
211 Daniel Thomas, op.cit.

life. As in the earlier work, it was based on memories of the motion of traffic and people tumbling and swaying as they spilled onto the street after closing time (then 6.30p.m.). In comparison with the earlier work, *Half Past Six at the Fitzroy* is compositionally more complex and daring. Here the broad, open area on the left of the painting, thrusting in a shark-like movement towards the circular shape on the right, is balanced by the interwoven, colourful mass of forms and figures. It suggests not only the mood of the people but also the geography of the Kings Cross and Woolloomooloo areas: of piled-up tenements crowded with people, on a hill overlooking the wharves and streets below.

The Fitzroy pub had been a regular gathering place for artists in the nearby area including John Olsen, Russell Drysdale, William Rose, Stan Rapotec and Ross Morrow. Olsen was well acquainted with the publican Charlie Lloyd (whose portrait he had painted) and many of the locals. Shortly before the opening of the Clune Galleries exhibition they asked him for a preview in the pub and, with characteristic good humour, Olsen obliged with a showing of *Half Past Six at the Fitzroy*. The Sydney *Telegraph* reported the occasion in an article titled 'An Abstract View of Time':

> Wharf labourers, tradesmen...and the rest of the clientele of the Fitzroy Hotel, Dowling Street, Woolloomooloo, this week took a puzzled look at a huge abstract canvas by Sydney artist John Olsen ...The bar was crowded for the preview unveiling on Thursday afternoon...Licensee Tas Tilbrook didn't pretend to understand the painting...'but I've seen plenty of blokes staggering out of here like those weaving lines,' he joked.[212]

Around the corner from the Fitzroy pub was another landmark of the area – the McElhone Steps, a steep stairway joining Woolloomooloo with Kings Cross. The artist Sali Herman had first depicted this subject in an image (fig.31) that won the Wynne Prize in 1944. It was a daring work in its time and was criticised by some journalists for the contemporary and prosaic nature of the subject. Never one to shun the subjects of daily life, Olsen celebrated the McElhone steps in his own way. In 1963 he saw it as a place where 'sailors, soldiers and drunks made their way to the bright lights of Kings Cross'. In the richly painted *McElhone Steps*, he rejected a literal depiction of the steps in favour of their metaphorical associations and the raunchy atmosphere of the area. Here, the repeated blue-black stairways move over the layers of the warm, red-orange ground.

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212 *Telegraph* (Sydney), 17 March 1963.

McElhone Steps was also the subject of one of his most successful lithographs, printed by Janet Dawson at Gallery A in Melbourne,[213] in which the possibilities of the medium, of using colour and drawing over the surface with various textured materials, are exploited to the full. A more specific, personal reference appears in the painting, *Billy Rose on the McElhone Steps* where Olsen focuses on his friend, transformed into a colourful, burlesque figure against a dark blue background.[214] It is a tribute to their close association going back to the early 1950s and to their shared exuberance for which they were well known at the time.

The works in Olsen's solo exhibition at Terry Clune Gallery in March 1963 provided the full gamut of what it was like to experience Hill End, Yarramalong and Woolloomooloo. Daniel Thomas wrote: 'I can only confess that if you are in love with Sydney's turbulence, there must be very few pictures which so successfully expressed the quality of life in a Woolloomooloo pub after work as 6.30 at the Fitzroy [Half Past Six at the Fitzroy]'. He continued:

> Olsen's city pictures are full of humanity and conversation...Such work makes nonsense of any clear distinction between abstract and figurative art, and Olsen's special significance at present in Australian painting is that he has been right through abstraction and come out the other side...There is a world of difference between such confident assurance and the timidities of semi-abstract art.[215]

Robert Hughes saw *Dappled Country*, *The Tree of Life* and *Reflections on a Marine Venus* as the key works in the exhibition: 'In them, Olsen's response to nature reaches an early climax of sensitivity. He presents us with evocations of place which can stand honourably beside any landscapes painted by Australians since 1885'.[216]

John Olsen had his first solo exhibition in Melbourne at Australian Galleries in October 1963. Australian Galleries had been set up in 1956 by Anne and Tom Purves and had rapidly attracted artists such as Arthur Boyd, Sidney Nolan and Fred Williams. Although this was Olsen's only solo show there in the 1960s, from the start of the following decade he exhibited there on a regular basis.

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213 This print was commissioned by the National Gallery Society of Victoria as one of a series of lithographs by Australian artists printed by Janet Dawson at Gallery A. See also, James Mollison, 'Printmaking in Australia', *Art and Australia*, vol.1, no.4, February 1964, p.238.
214 See illustration in Craig McGregor, *In the Making*, Thomas Nelson, Melbourne, unpaginated.
215 *Telegraph* (Sydney), 17 March 1963.
216 *Nation*, 9 March 1963.

The focus of the show was the urban environment and 'portrait landscapes', with the major, previously unexhibited work being *McElhone Steps*. Bernard Smith wrote a critical review titled, 'Opportunity to Compare', in which he acknowledged Olsen's 'refined and joyous feeling for colour' and 'pattern making to the point of genius'. However, he took him to task for 'keeping up with the Jones's of recent painting', finding the artist's joy 'too forced, too rhetorical, showy and redundant' to his taste. By contrast, he found 'In Len French's noughts and crosses...pain, power, honour and evil'.[217]

It has been intimated in the past that these attitudes exemplified the contrast between Sydney and Melbourne: the former with its more receptive climate to new ideas and outwardly expressive works and the latter preferring order, control and social comment. While there may well be a grain of truth in this, it cannot be applied too literally. Many Melbourne artists responded favourably to Olsen's work and, from the time of the exhibition, he developed a considerable following in this city.[218]

In 1963 John and Valerie Olsen bought a beautiful old cottage at Watsons Bay, near the entrance to Sydney harbour. This was an idyllic location for one so enamoured with the flux of the harbour. His romantic temperament also responded to the village atmosphere of the place:

> When we bought the house at Watsons Bay everyone said it was too far out...I created it in terms of Under Milk Wood – there was Black Jack, German Edna...it was bloody marvellous! They would keep the Watsons Bay Hotel open past closing time...there was a tower there and they could see the police car coming down Old South Head Road and could get everyone out before the police arrived. Now that's village stuff!

Here Olsen was able to reconstruct his own seaport cradling into the land forms, as in *Morning Watsons Bay*, 1964 – 67 where his enclosed world is plotted and pieced together - their white house accentuated - surrounded by the rhythmical topography of the peninsula with its lighthouse, looking across to Camp Cove and swinging around to Middle Harbour. The character of the place was also informed by the local inhabitants such as the fishermen whose portraits Olsen occasionally painted, as in *Humphrey* (pl.39).

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[217] *Age*, 8 October 1963.

[218] During the author's discussions with Clifton Pugh and Albert Tucker, both remember being impressed with Olsen's works of the 1960s. Anne Purves, Director of Australian Galleries recalls: 'For as long as I can remember John's work was admired by Melbourne artists. I always thought the best judges of artists are other artists.'

Despite the successful exhibition sales and the prizes he had won over the past few years, Olsen was still not able to paint full-time. He held art classes in his own studio, taught at the Mary White Art School and once again presented lectures to the architecture students at the University of New South Wales. However his tremendous joy at finding a place to live that so amply fulfilled his spiritual and temporal dreams meant that he was able to maintain his creative drive in a way that had proved difficult two years previously in Paddington.

During the last few months of 1963 and into 1964 Olsen painted some of his most extraordinary city-harbour paintings, including *Entrance to the Siren City of the Rat Race* (pl.22). In the resplendent, juicy-fruit colours and tumultuous activity he gave full expression to his discovery of a 'new dead heart of neons, no-hopers and nicknackery'. Within this teeming mass of people, arms reach into the tangled network of the metropolis and out to the entrance of the deep, blue-green harbour. The title for the work came from comments made by the State premier, whom Olsen described as a rather mediocre politician: 'He said that Sydney had such a large population that he was concerned that it would become the siren city of the rat race'. For Olsen, that was precisely what the city had become - a wild, jubilant and chaotic rat race. Robert Hughes recalled that what made his response to the urban environment so refreshing was that he saw 'hedonism and scepticism as two sides of the Sydney coin'.[219]

The sister painting to this work is *Entrance to the Seaport of Desire* (pl.40). Here, the visual elaboration of detail and complex, jewel-like surface is reminiscent of the brilliant, richly encrusted sculptural architecture of Gaudi, which Olsen had seen in Barcelona. Within this luxuriant cornucopia, the white shape with teeth is symbolic of the Opera House, which was embroiled in an administrative nightmare at the time. For Olsen, the city was a place swarming with temptations and desire, a place of extraordinary beauty as well as a place of potential entrapment. He later wrote:

> I've always thought of the formation of Sydney's land forms as a bitch goddess and frankly at times it frightens me. The breasty contours of its hills...when your [sic] sailing through the heads you feel as though your [sic] sailing through her arms - And when you are coming into her you feel you are going deeper and you are caught in her spidery net.[220]

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219 Dutton, op. cit.
220 Olsen, *Salute to Five Bells*, op.cit.

In 1963 and 1964 Olsen's vocabulary of images included domestic subjects such as gardens, cats, picnics, barbecues and summer promenades. In these works he found a remarkable balance between pictorial structure, visual sensation and personal, internal emotion. While on one level these subjects relate to French Impressionism and artists like Bonnard and Matisse, Olsen still maintained a strong sense of the surreal. In the work on paper, *The Garden and Me* (fig.33), the idea of immersion in the natural world is accentuated in the exotic petals of the central flower, which radiates fingers, and in the centre of the plant above, which is also an eye. These kinds of images were also explored by the symbolist and nature poets, such as Stephane Mallarmé and e.e. cummings.[221]

Olsen's large oil, *Me the gardener* (pl.41), won the Launceston Art Prize in 1964. The figure of the gardener on the left holding a rake and sowing seeds from his bowl, and the large golden-yellow flower in the centre, metamorphose with the hybrid forms in this magical garden, reminding one of André Breton's statement, 'The marvellous is always beautiful...anything that is beautiful is marvellous'.[222]

In the early 1960s, Olsen's works on paper were often a means of developing ideas for paintings. He never did exact preliminary studies, but saw these drawings as part of a developing process. Although some of the gouaches lacked the control of the slower drying medium of oil paint and occasionally tended towards confusion, among them were examples of remarkable strength and inventiveness. Such was the case with his fantastic drawings of cats in 1963, as in the bold, frontal composition of the zany *Bird and Cat* (fig.34).

Olsen was attracted to the subject of cats because of their independence while still relating to people, their flexibility of movement and the strong role they played in the history of art, 'like those marvellous cats you see in Egyptian art'. One of the most successful oils on this theme was *My Cat's Life* (pl.42) in which Olsen employs a subtle range of colour and tonal relationships, gradually built up over the surface through fluid, sensuous brushmarks. Finer details are explored through his facility to draw with the brush - in the curling, stylised cats whiskers and in the fine red and yellow lines which describe an array of faces attached to this cat's world.

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221 See for example, e.e. cummings, 'Spring is like a perhaps hand', *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, Third Edition, W.W. Norton & Company, New York and London, 1983, p.1925.
222 H.B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art, 1961 - 1986*, University of California Press, Berkley, Los Angeles and London, 1988.

Watsons Bay was a special place for John Olsen and his family in the 1960s. In 1964 Louise Olsen was born and her childhood memories of Watsons Bay in subsequent years, like those of her brother Tim, are vividly coloured by the artistic atmosphere which was their total living environment. Both their parents' art works hung on the walls, with John's brush at one point extending over the stove and walls of the kitchen, as well as to the toys he painted for his children. Louise Olsen recalls:

> I'll never forget I was dying for this doll's house. It was all white and he ended up doing this painting with love hearts on the door and flowers and petals. He was inspired by us and watched over our world. He would get really involved. Dad loved cooking so much... even when it was steak and kidney pie, the pastry used to be this wonderful decoration of roosters or crabs and he used to involve Tim and I in making the figures. There were also these walks every morning and we all used to go down the beach for a swim...There was this wonderful rock pool walk between Camp Cove and Watsons Bay Beach.[223]

The idea of the freedom of a child in the water, of the total immersion of one's physical being and senses within the rhythms of the ocean, was lyrically expressed in *Childhood by the Seaport* (pl.43), with its cool palette of dark blues, sea greens and lemon yellows. The fluid drawing with the brush of the central figure explores a confluence between the biology of human and plant life in the sea, of people being just as primitive as sea urchins. He also saw parallels between human structure and maps of river systems: 'How about if I had seen aerial photographs of the Nile Delta ...of this painting being a tree and a river and a nervous system...Therefore we are looking at nature with more of a transferency'.

A considerable number of artists, gallery curators and art dealers from around the country visited the house over a period of time. Among the regular visiting artists were Fred Williams, Jan Senbergs, Clifton Pugh and Colin Lanceley. Consistent memories are of the special atmosphere of conversation, wine and Olsen's improvisational approach to cooking - of coloured food, purple cabbage and dishes beautifully decorated with strands of red capsicum and black olives. The subjects of food and cooking began to enter into his paintings, such as *The picnic* (pl.44), where the act of cooking informed by feeling is combined with humorous, playfully macabre overtones, in the rather too-alive creature in the centre of the pan. The shape of the pan, the decorative motifs and the flattened out vertical lines of the

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223 Louise Olsen, interview with the author.

barbecue grill over the creamy coloured ground create a striking composition. The joy of cooking, preparing meals and sharing with other human beings would become the subjects of many subsequent paintings, such as the *Portuguese Kitchens* (pls.53 & 54) and *Duck a l'Orange* (pl.107). The cumulative nature of the paella in particular found parallels with Olsen's attitudes to life and art:

> I have painted pictures of paella which I cooked in a huge iron pot... It is the colour of the Spanish flag, the rice is saffron laced with orangy red peppers, chicken, fish, mussels, port, tomatoes and parsley. It is a sharing, gregarious sumptuous dish. Its origins are peasant and it brings together so many disparate elements.[224]

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'JOIE DE VIVRE': ART AS A TOTAL ENVIRONMENT

The idea that art should be an integral part of daily life, as he had observed in Europe, was clearly something John Olsen wanted to share with others. This enveloped not only his own home environment in the 1960s but also extended to ceiling paintings, commissions for particular residences and a tapestry design, adding another dimension to the concept of 'totality of experience'. Olsen recognised that the demands of the various commissions required specific solutions according to the locations. In the case of the ceilings he always painted on hardboard panels, so that the works could be transported if the owner decided to move.

In an enlightened move Frank McDonald commissioned Olsen to create a ceiling painting for the sitting room of his Woollahra home in 1962 (pl.45). Olsen responded with great enthusiasm to the idea of a contemporary version of a Baroque ceiling. Large panels were attached to the surface around a central chandelier and scaffolding was erected on which he stood to paint. McDonald's main requirement was that he wanted to bring the sun into a flat which was rather dark. Using predominantly primary colours, Olsen drew with the brush directly onto the ceiling, aided and abetted by the jazz music of 'Chicago' in the background. McDonald soon entered into a playful conspiracy when he noticed that, in response to the jazz, Olsen seemed to be applying broad, slashing strokes. Fearful that the ceiling might become too heavy, he began to alternate the tempo with Mozart's horn concerto, which resulted in lighter, more fragmented touches and arabesques. The artist, quickly aware of what was going on, objected jestfully to this manipulation, calling out 'Put

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[224] John Olsen, *In Search of the Open Country 1961-1986*, op. cit., p.7.

on Chicago!'[225] In the razzle dazzle of this *Summer in the You Beaut Country*, Olsen effectively fulfilled the requirements of the commission: 'that it be light, bright and airy'.

It was under this ceiling that Olsen painted his first tapestry design, *Joie de Vivre* (pl.46). The idea of the tapestry had come about several months after the ceiling was completed and the design was painted under much the same conditions. He spent considerable time researching the subject of tapestry making and recognised that, due to the demands of the medium, he had to keep the outlines very exactly defined, without losing a feeling of spontaneity and vitality. The design for *Joie de Vivre* was sent to the Portalegre tapestry workshops in Portugal in June 1964. The end result, returned to Australia the following year, was a lavish, decorative display of warm colour and his characteristic flowing, calligraphic line.

The mood and design of this work related directly to the ceiling, *Life Burst* (pl.47) commissioned for the hallway of Thelma Clune's residence in 1964. The subject was particularly pertinent, as the work was painted at the time his daughter, Louise, was born. Thelma Clune recalls:

> He was trotting off to his wife in the hospital in the evening and painting my ceiling in the day...It was an opportunity to rejoice in him having a daughter. He didn't get down and do it on the floor or on the table. It all went up on the ceiling by his own hand...I don't know how he could paint for so many hours looking up.[226]

Olsen wanted the ceiling to be a welcoming feature to Clune's apartment. Here the paint is pulled along from the right; it is dabbed, twisted, scratched into, squeezed from a tube and layered, culminating in the final burst of life on the left. For Olsen, the celebratory emotional tenor of this work was closely allied to Hopkins's poem *Spring*, and the line, 'What is all this juice and all this joy'.[227]

In 1963 and 1964, Olsen undertook two private commissions based on the theme of *Five Bells* , signalling his early interest in the Australian poet, Kenneth Slessor, and the poem that would later become the subject of his best known public commission, the Sydney Opera House mural. Unlike the later work, these 1960s paintings did not relate to the elegiac tenor of the poem but rather represented a shared, passionate

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225 Frank McDonald, interview with the author.
226 Thelma Clue, interview with the author.
227 *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, op.cit., p.28.

connection with the harbour. *Five Bells*, 1963 (pl.48) heralded the introduction of a motif that would become a central feature of many future paintings: the circular mandala shape, from which dynamic, calligraphic lines flow inwards and outwards. The circle is a universal symbol; a sign of the totality of things, of wholeness. In Zen philosophy it encompasses both fullness and emptiness. It is the source from which life emerges - here seen as the rock pool enclosing within its fluxing movements a system of gullies, rock encrustations, plant and animal life, fishes and sea anemone - pushing out tributaries which explore the surrounding vastness. The incisively drawn, probing lines moving out from the circle and the accentuation of the edge, foreshadow some of the Lake Eyre drawings and watercolours in the following decade.

One of Olsen's most vital ceiling paintings is *King Sun* (pl.50) that represents a comprehensive expression of his romantic temperament in the mid-1960s. From the powerful life-giving energy of the golden-orange sun, the rays become tentacles: at one with the plant forms and the ecstatic scatter of pollen; at one with the saffron rice and juicy red peppers of the paella; and at one with the crazy, irrational creatures who have come under its pulsating spell.

The first public exposure of the ceilings occurred in exhibitions at Terry Clune Galleries in April 1965 and at South Yarra Gallery in Melbourne in June of that year. By this time, the *Joie de Vivre* tapestry had been sent back from Portugal and had received considerable acclaim when shown in both cities. Daniel Thomas wrote that it was 'tempting to call John Olsen's exhibition at Terry Clune Gallery the show of the year' and described the gallery as having been 'transformed into a brilliant rococo pavilion, an Amalienberg'.[228]

Similarly, Bernard Smith noted, 'At South Yarra Gallery [Olsen's] sumptuous and refulgent colour pours down upon us from ceiling and walls, a resplendent exhibition which takes vitalism and colouristic exuberance about as far as it can go'. Smith felt that Olsen's art had benefited from his growing preference for universal theme, 'rich in connotation and emotional content' and also perceived a new technical subtlety in works such as *We are all but Toys of the Mind* (pl.51) and *Childhood by the Seaport* (pl.43). He summed up the mood of the exhibition when he wrote, 'in this show if anywhere in Australian art, something of the plasticity and

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[228] *Telegraph* (Sydney), 25 April 1965.

swing of the baroque emerges - a kind of lay, sun-burnt baroque, exulting in the life force.'[229]

Between 1960 and 1965 John Olsen had been riding the crest of a wave of artistic acclaim. He had won numerous art prizes, his works and ideas were frequently canvassed in the popular press, he was the subject of a monograph by Virginia Spate in 1963 and his paintings were acquired by all State Galleries around the country. During these years, Olsen's identification with Sydney had been so complete that it was as though he not only identified with the city, but the city identified with him. However the tide was changing. In July of 1965 he departed for Portugal, and when he returned some eighteen months later, the artistic climate was very different from the one he had left.

The early 1960s had been a time of close friendships among the Victoria Street group of artists and others; a time of lively debates and discussions. Friendships and discourse would naturally continue, but the verve of the interchange and the feeling of a community for Olsen and a number of Sydney artists would remain particular to what had been a heady, occasionally frustrating, but most often exhilarating, period in Australian art.

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[229] *Age*, 16 June 1965.

fig.24 *Tres Amigos* 1960, gouache on paper, 67 x 47cm. Collection: Newcastle Region Art Gallery

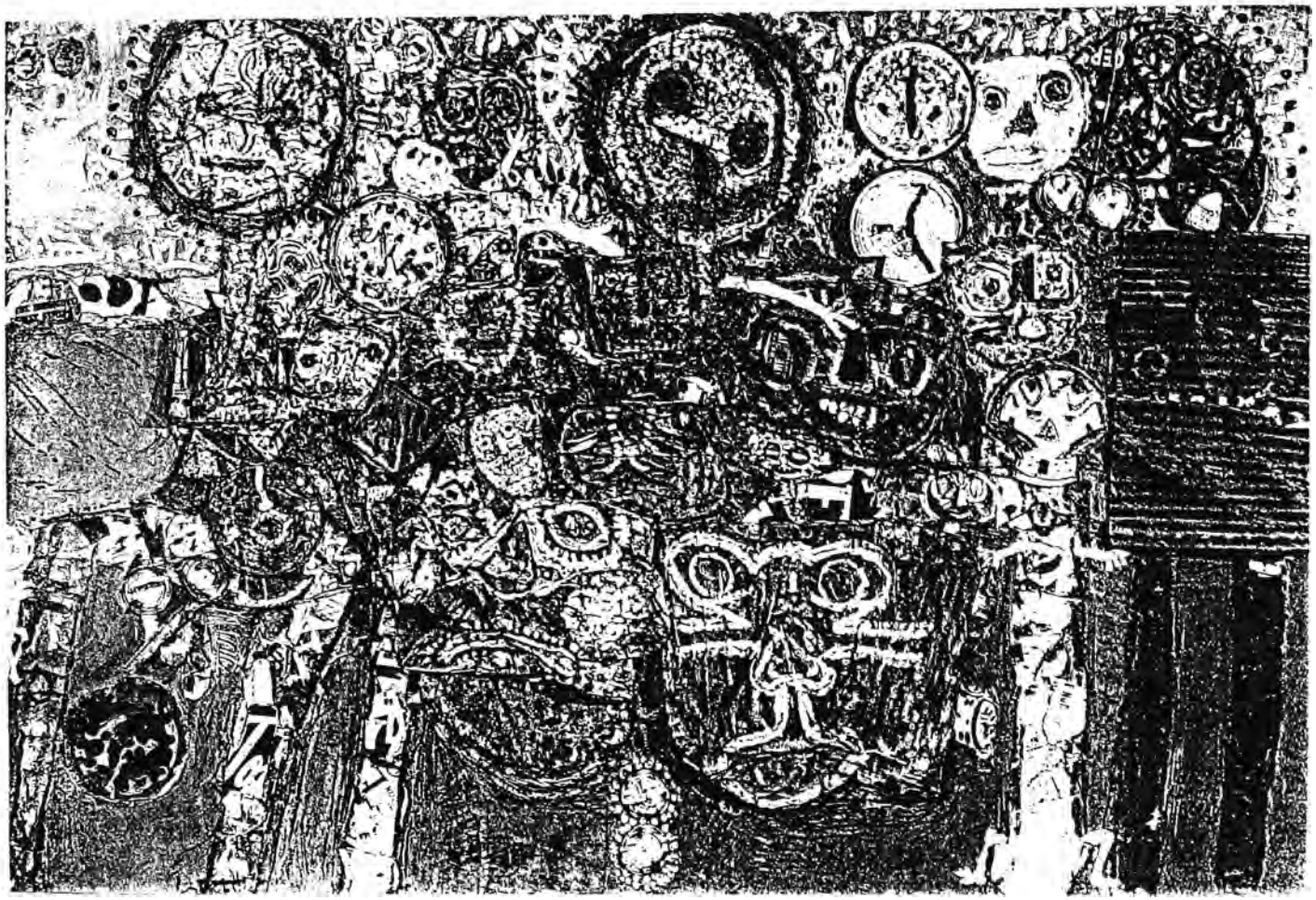


fig.25 Colin Lanceley, *Glad Family Picnic* 1961, oil, enamel and mixed media collage on plywood, 122 x 183cm. Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales
The faces and figures imbedded within the environment in this work by Lanceley bears comparison with Olsen's *People who live in Victoria Street*, 1961.

fig.26 Peter Upward, *June Celebration* 1961, synthetic polymer paint on composition board, 113.5 x 411.5cm. Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

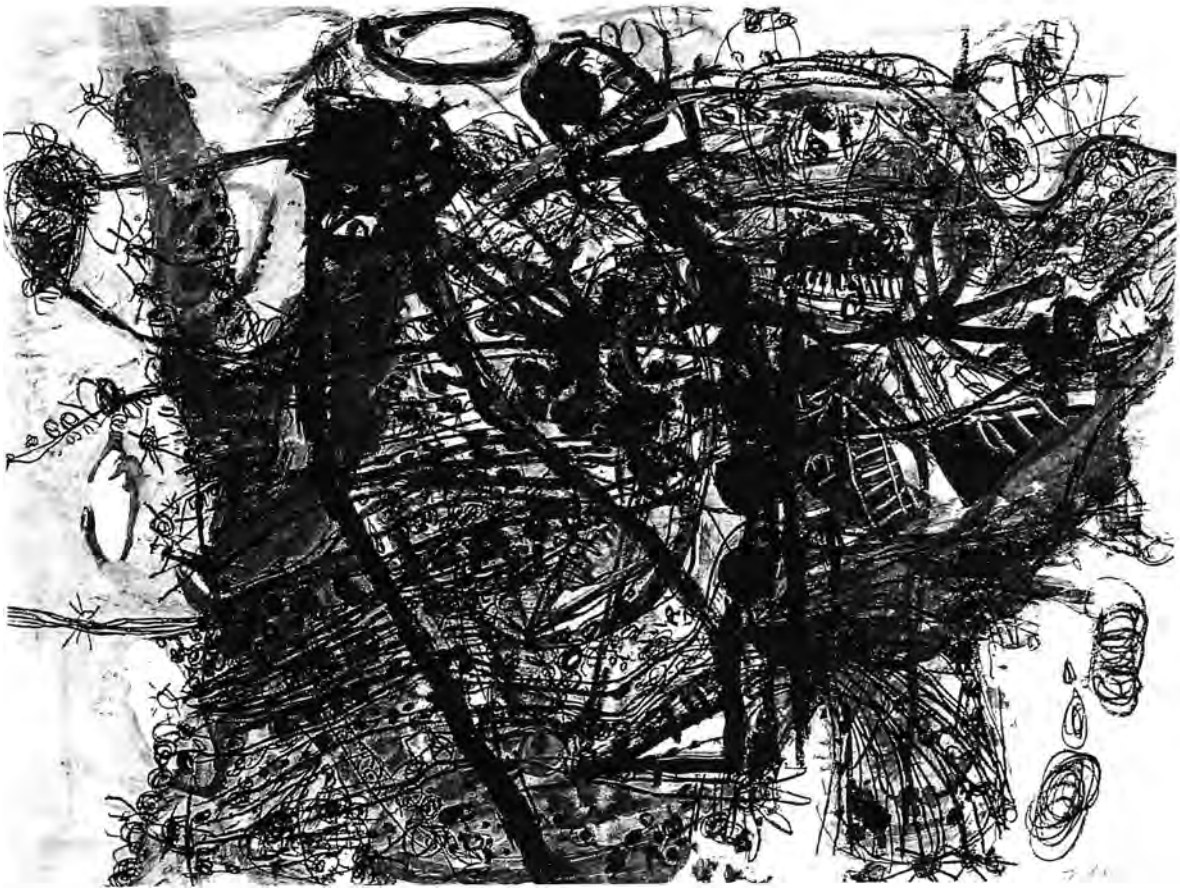


fig.27 *Australian Flux* 1960, charcoal and gouache on paper, 67.3 x 92.7cm
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. Gift of Terry Clune

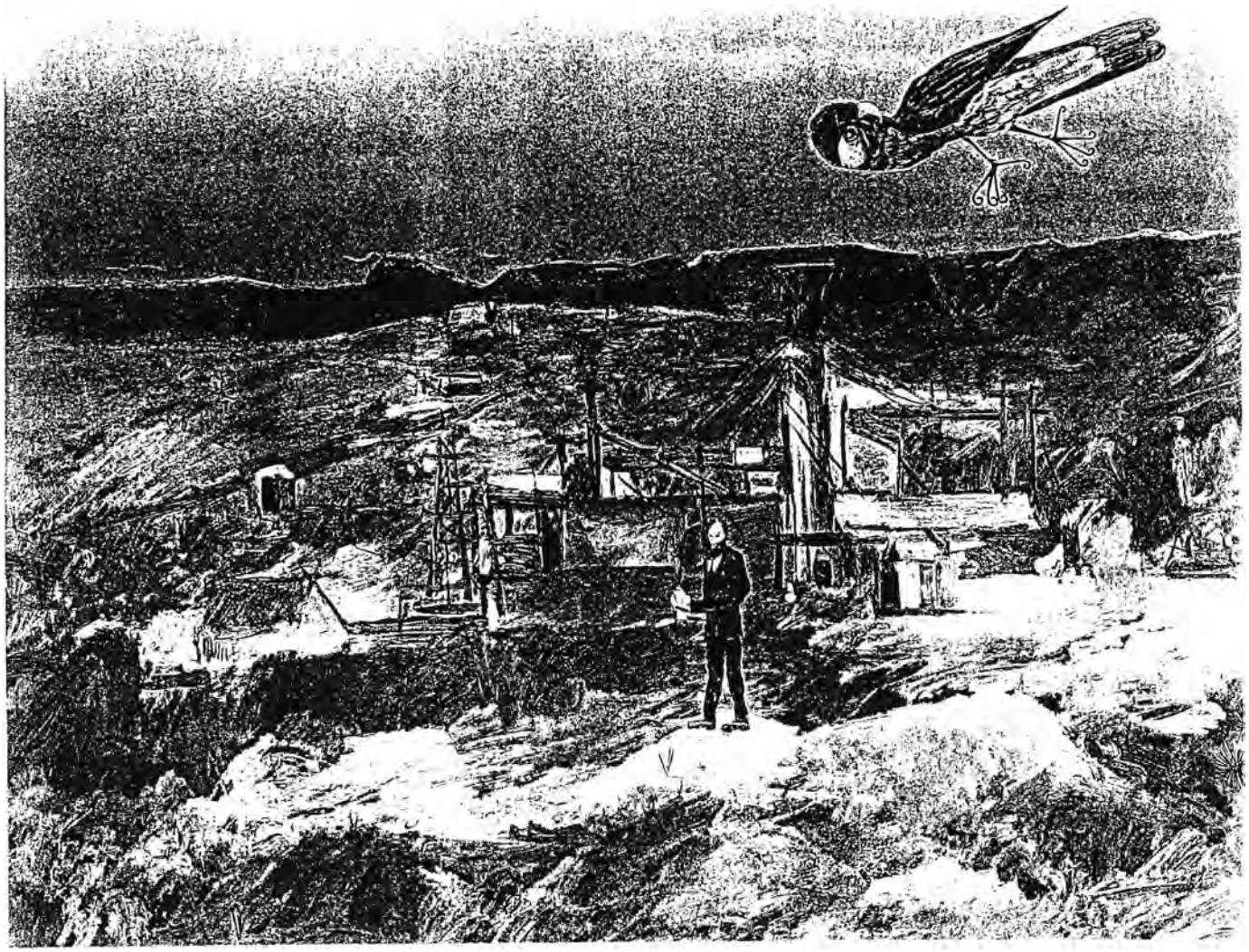


fig.28 Sidney Nolan, *Pretty Polly Mine* 1948, ripolin enamel on hardboard, 91 x 122.2cm. Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales.
Olsen was inspired by the irrational qualities in Nolan's paintings of the 1940s and his distinctive grasp of an Australian ethos.

NATION

DEALING IN OPTIONS

•

The Beaut World Of John Olsen

•

Hard Pressed Medical Funds • *"Four Corners" Skewed*

In the early 1960s John Olsen's work received considerable media and public attention.

fig.29 *Spring* 1960, oil on canvas, 122 x 92 cm
Private collection

fig.30 *Hill End* c.1962, oil on paper (three sheets) on board, 72.7 x 104.5cm
Private collection

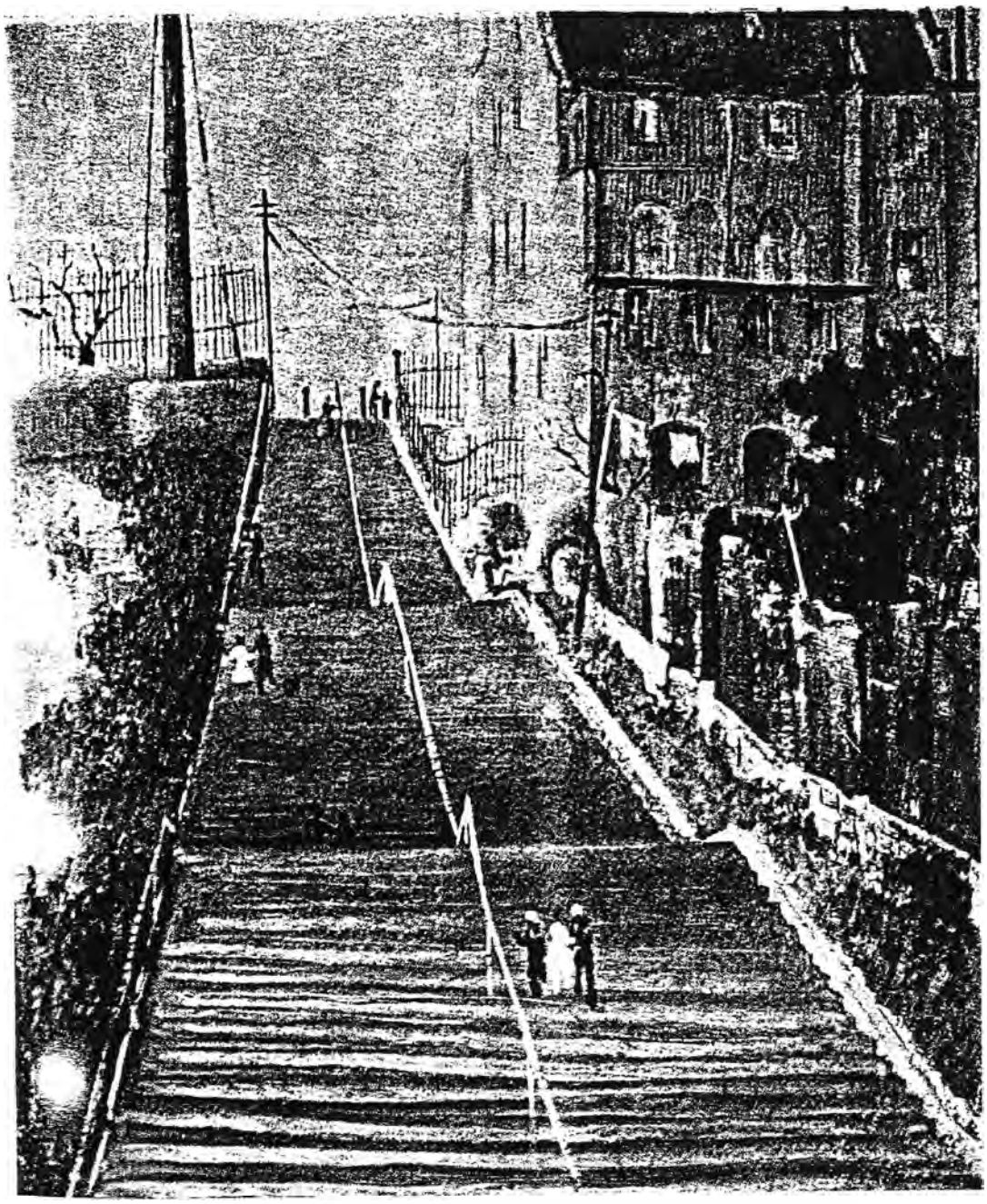


fig.31 Sali Herman, *McElhone Stairs* 1944, oil on canvas, 67.3 x 55cm
Private collection (illustrated in Smith, *Australian Painting*, p.235 - see Bibliography)

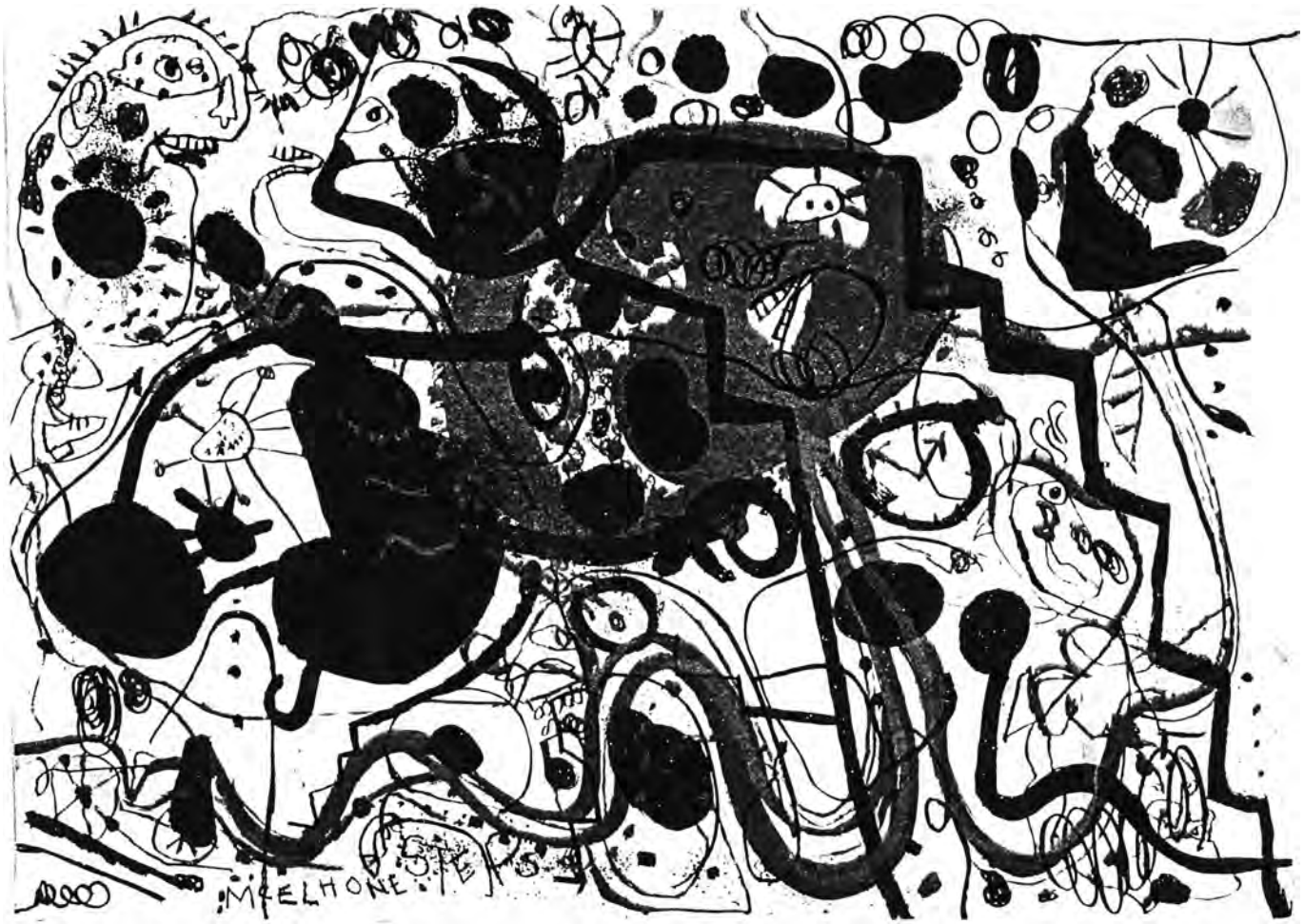


fig.32 *McElhone Steps* 1963, ed.50, colour lithograph, three colours on Arches paper, 57.5 x 80cm (sheet), printed by Janet Dawson, Gallery A, Melbourne

fig.33 *The Garden and Me* 1964,
oil and crayon on paper, 55 x 75cm
Private collection

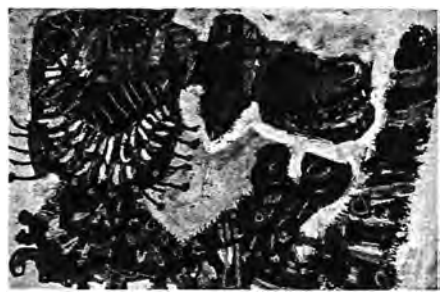


fig.34 *Bird and Cat* c.1963,
gouache and oil on paper, 50 x 75.7cm
Private collection

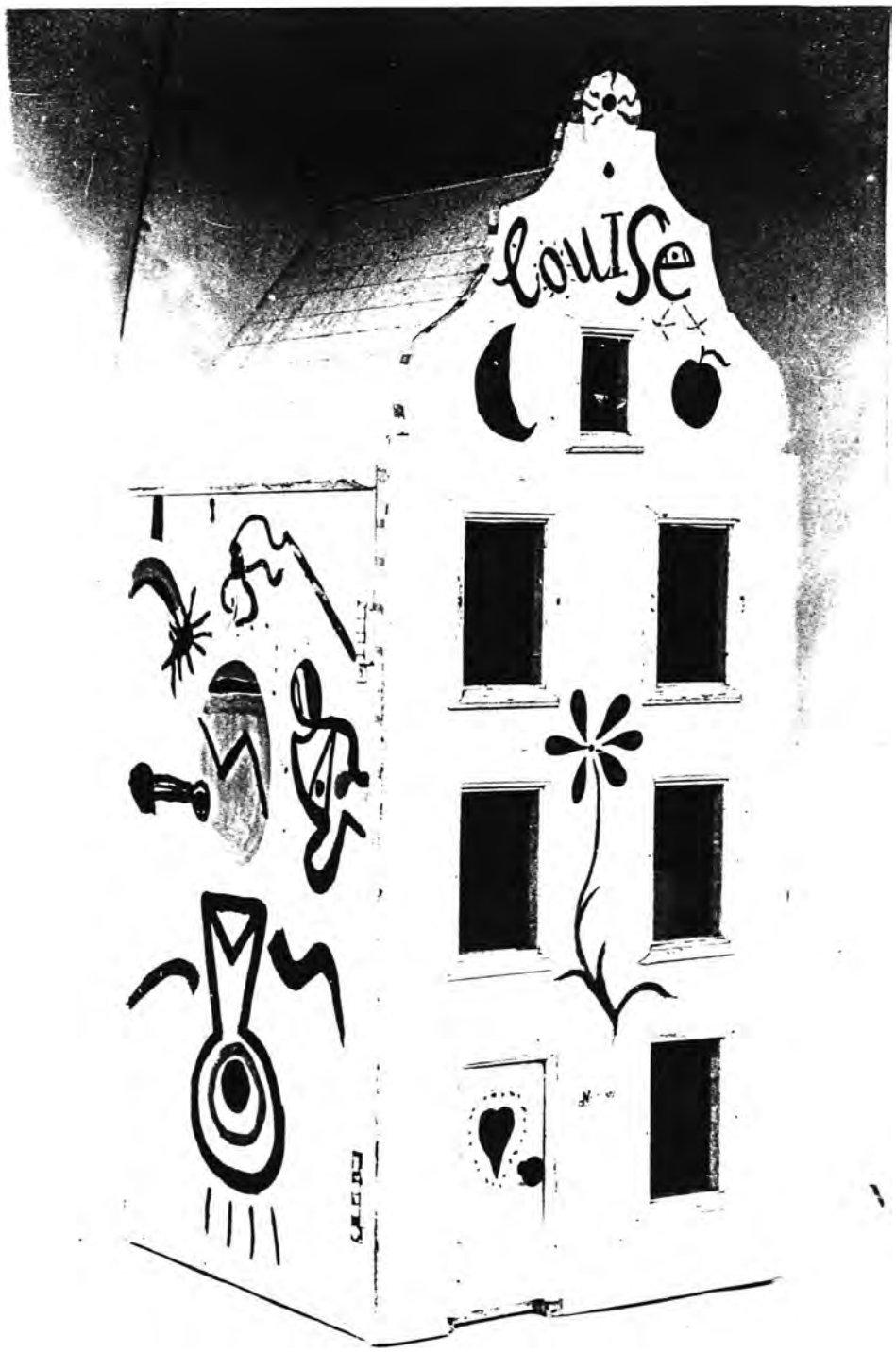
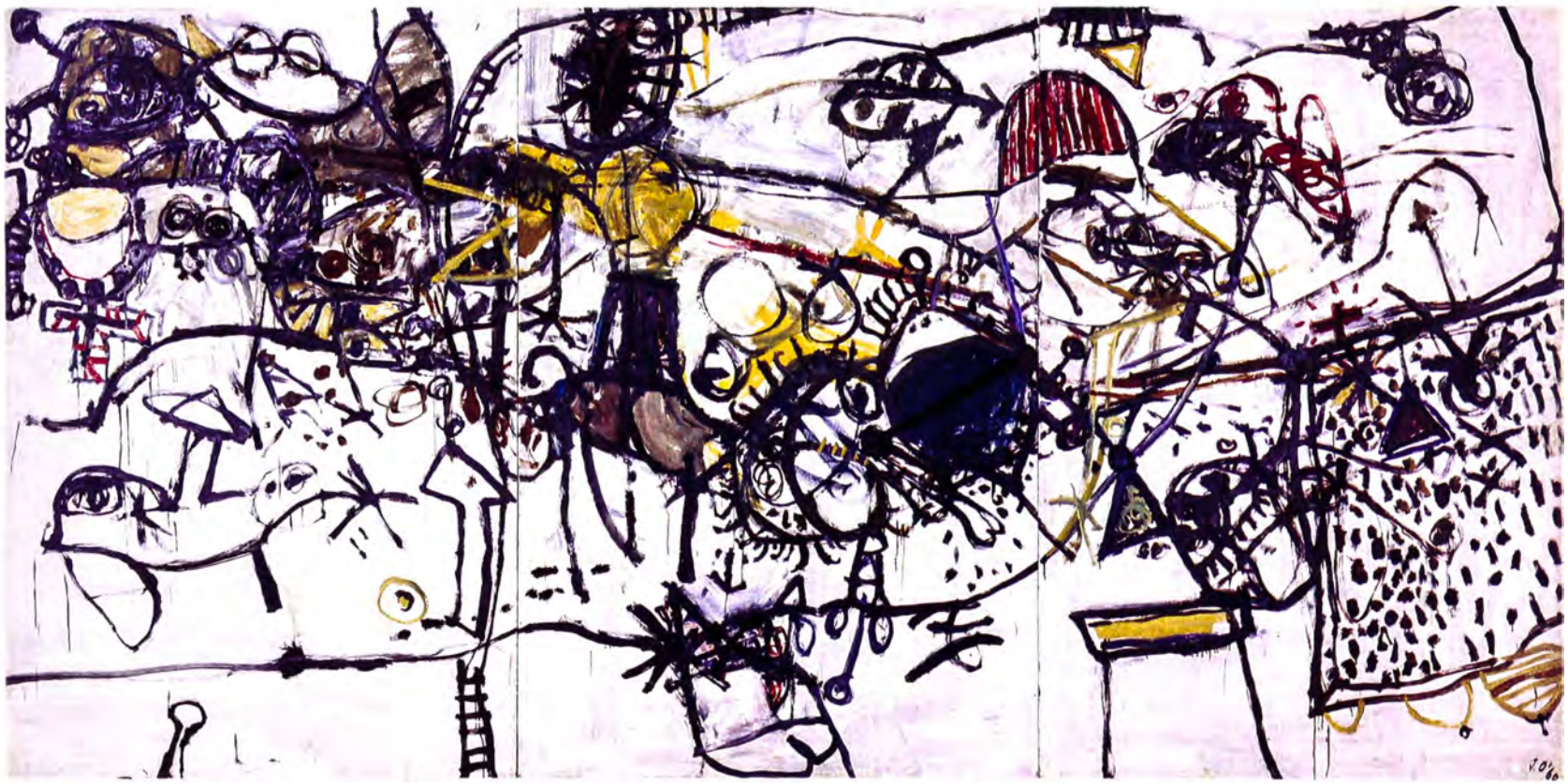


fig.35 The doll's house that John Olsen decorated for his daughter, Louise.

'He was inspired by us and watched over our world.'
Louise Olsen

pl.22 *Entrance to the Siren City of the Rat Race* 1963, oil on canvas, 120 x 182.5cm. Private collection, on loan to Macquarie University, Sydney



pl.23 *Spanish Encounter* 1960, oil on three hardboard panels, 183 x 366cm. Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales

pl.24 *The Procession* 1960 (two panels), acrylic, ink and wash and gesso on board, 91.5 x 244cm. Collection: Charles Nodrum, on loan to La Trobe University

pl.25 *People who live in Victoria Street* 1960, oil on board, 117.8 x 182.9cm. Private collection

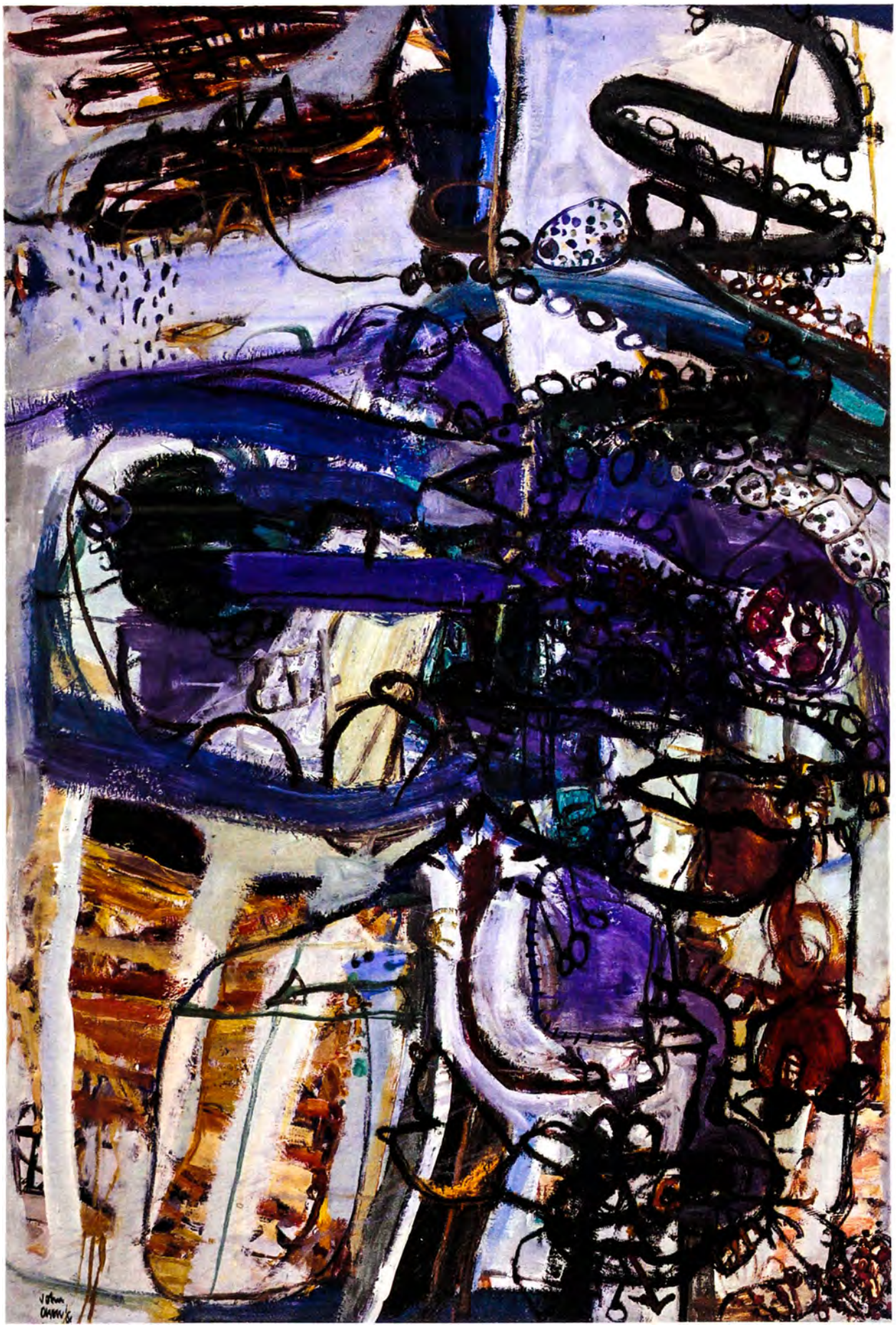
pl.26 *Journey into the You Beaut Country No.1* 1961,
oil on composition board, 152.7 x 101.9cm
Collection: National Gallery of Victoria

pl.27 *Journey into the You Beaut Country No.2* 1961,
oil on composition board, 185.8 x 124.2cm
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery

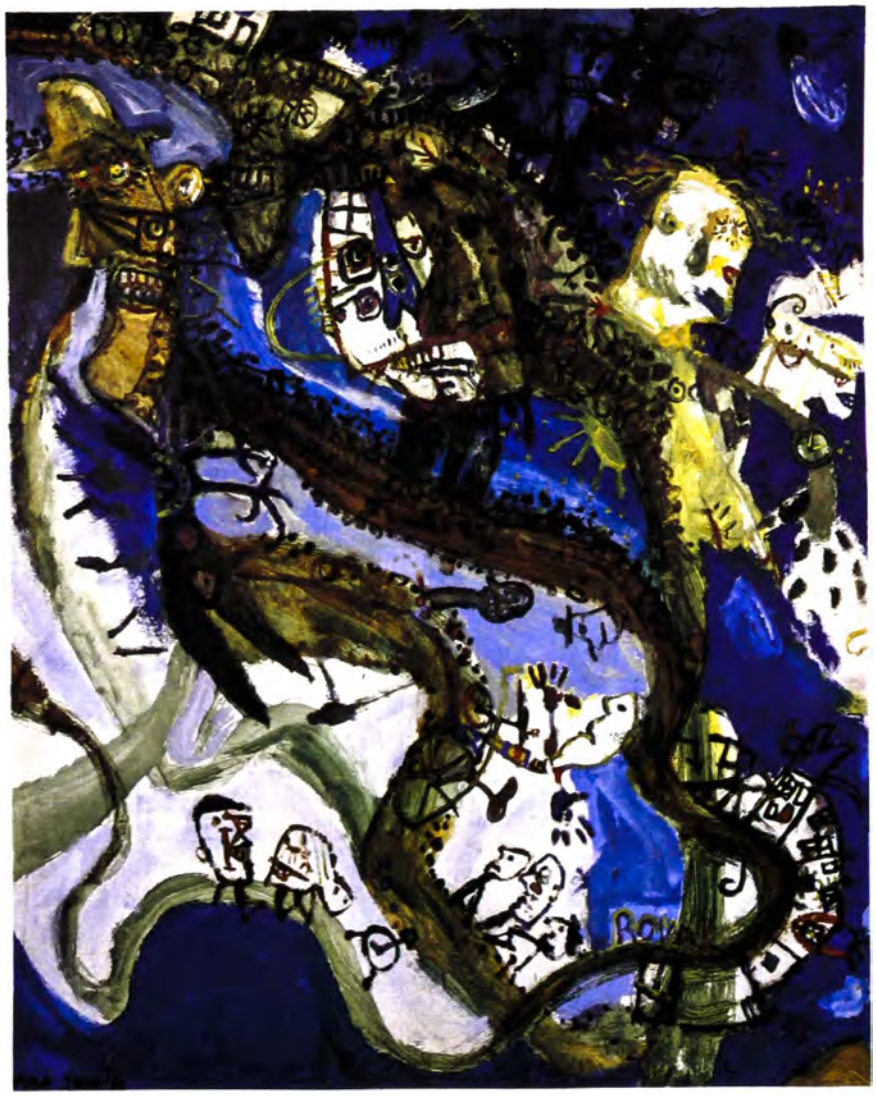
pl.28 *Spring in the You Beaut Country* 1961,
oil on composition board, 183 x 122cm
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
Gift of Rudy and Ruth Komon

pl.29 *Summer in the You Beaut Country* 1963,
oil on hardboard, 137 x 180cm
Collection: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart

pl.30 *Blue Orpheus* 1961, oil on compostion, 92 x 220cm. Private collection



pl.31 *Up and Down the Seaport* 1961, oil on hardboard, 182.8 x 121.8cm
Collection: Art Gallery of Western Australia



pl.32 *Portrait Landscape No.2* 1961-62,
oil on board, 152.4 x 122cm
Private collection

pl.33 *People who live in the You Beaut Country* 1962,
oil on board, 152.4 x 121.9cm
Private Collection

pl.34 *Creek Bed, Hill End* 1961,
oil on board, 122 x 91.5cm
Collection: Mr and Mrs. Charles Nodrum

pl.35 *Dappled Country* 1963, oil on canvas, 122.2 x 153.5cm
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

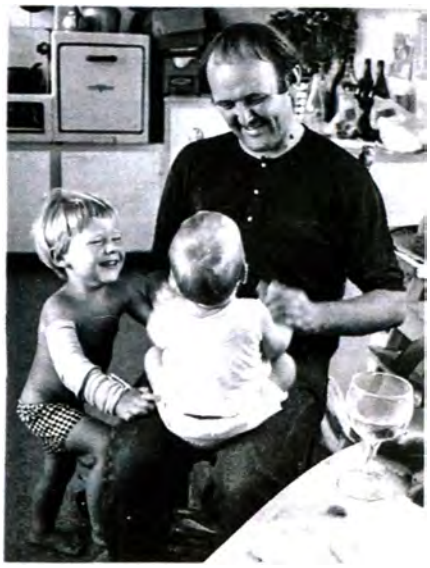
pl.36 *Tree of life* 1963, oil on canvas, 182.8 x 122cm
Private collection

pl.37 *Half Past Six at the Fitzroy* 1963, oil on canvas, 137.5 x 182cm. Collection: Art Gallery of South Australia. Gift of Daniel Thomas

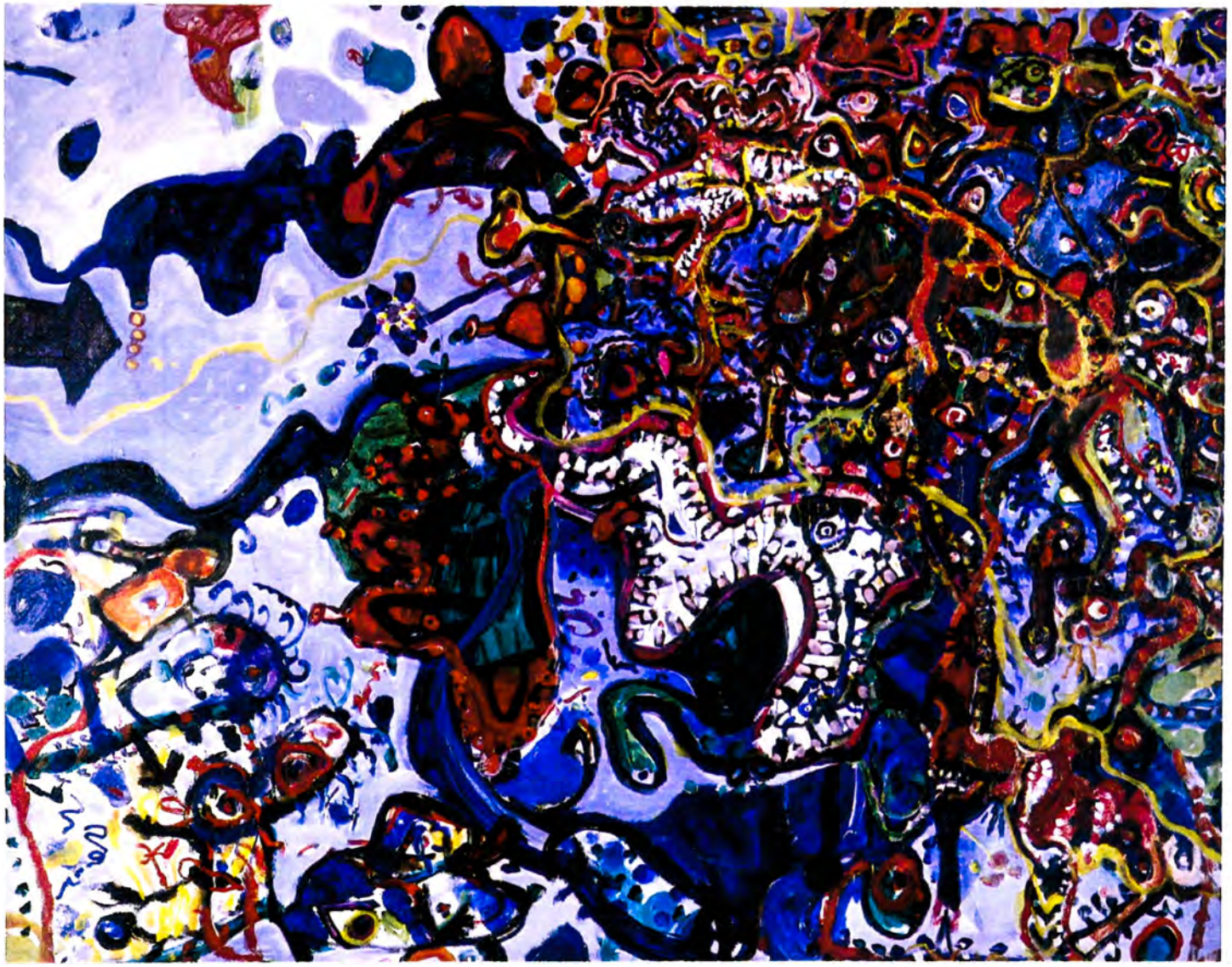
pl.38 *McElhone Steps* 1963, oil on board, 121.3 x 182.5cm. Collection: Alan Boxer

John Olsen and Rudy Komon swimming at Watsons Bay.
Photo by Robert Walker. Courtesy Gwen Frolich

pl.39 *Humphrey* 1963,
oil on board, 88 x 92cm
Private collection



John Olsen with his children Tim and Louise at Watsons Bay



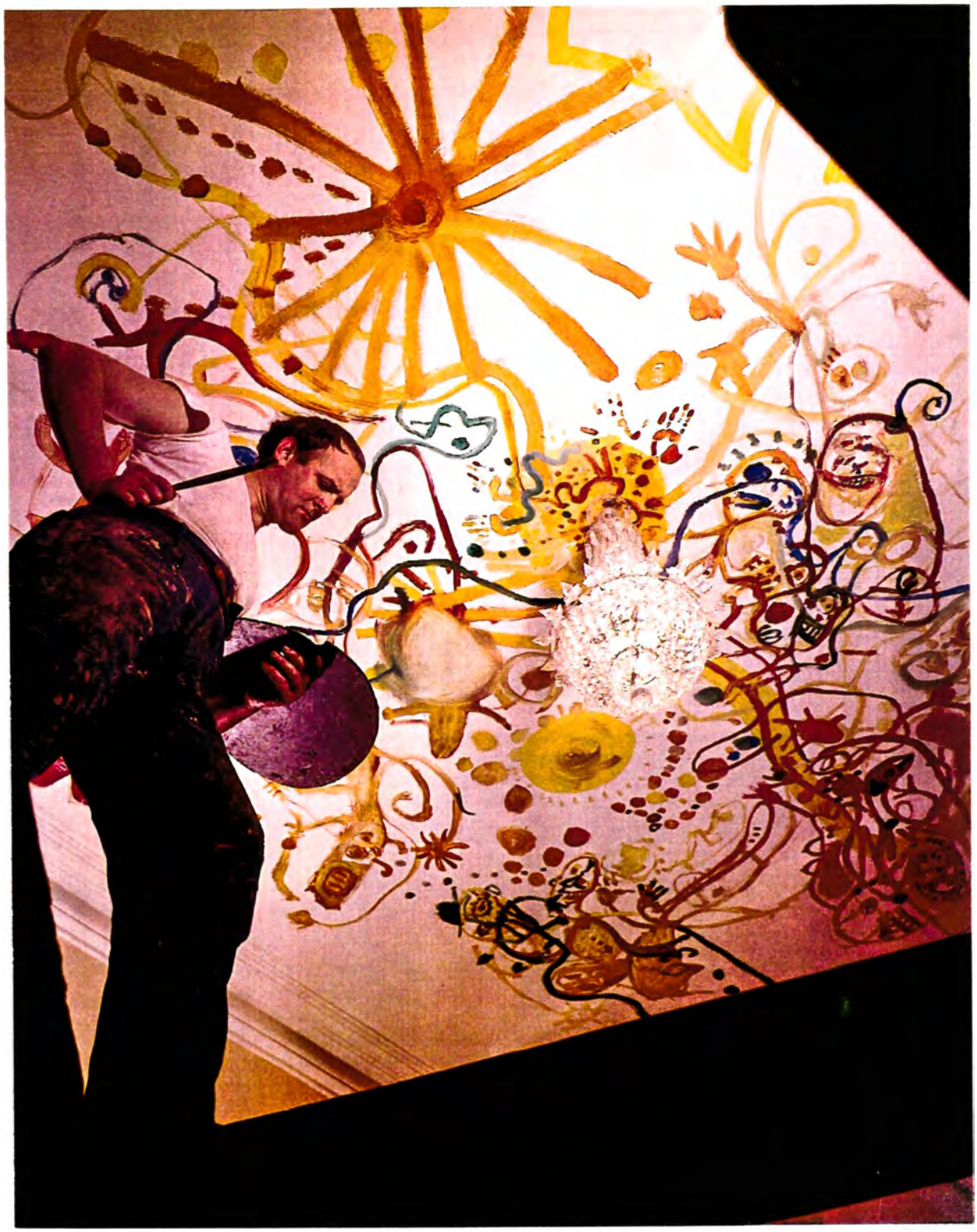
pl.40 *Entrance to the Seaport of Desire* 1964, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 167.6 x 213.4cm.
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. Gift of Sandra McGrath

pl.41 *Me the gardener* 1964, oil on canvas, 121.7 x 183.2cm. Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston

pl.42 *My Cat's Life* 1963, oil on canvas, 120.5 x 151.5cm. Private collection

pl.43 *Childhood by the Seaport* 1965, oil on board, 213.5 x 150.6cm.
Collection: Alan Boxer

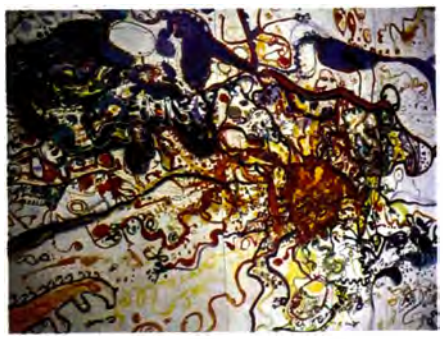
pl.44 *The picnic* 1965, oil on board, 121 x 182.5cm. Private collection



pl.45 *The artist at work on Summer in the You Beaut Country* 1962,
oil on composition board, 396.4 x 366cm (six panels)
Collection: National Gallery of Victoria.
Presented by Mr. Frank McDonald through the Art Foundation.

pl.46 *Joie de Vivre* 1964, woollen tapestry, 180 x 299cm
Designed by John Olsen in Australia, woven at the Portalegre Tapestry Workshop, Portugal
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales

pl. 47 *Life Burst* 1964 (in its original location
as a ceiling in Thelma Clune's apartment),
oil and synthetic polymer on hardboard,
146.4 x 639.2cm.
Collection: Newcastle Region Art Gallery



pl.49 *Sea Sun and Five Bells* 1964
(detail of ceiling in situ),
oil on three hardboard panels.
Private Collection

pl.48 *Five Bells* 1963, oil on hardboard, 264.5 x 274cm
Collection: George and Eva Clarke

pl.50 *King Sun* 1965, oil on three hardboard panels, 164 x 360cm. Collection: Rupert Murdoch

pl.51 *We are all but Toys of the Mind* 1965, oil on canvas, 183 x 244cm. Collection: James Fairfax

CHAPTER 6

LONDON AND PORTUGAL
1965 - 1967

With the success of the *Joie de Vivre* tapestry John Olsen was enthusiastic about the prospect of continuing to work in this medium and was keen to deepen his knowledge of the history and process of tapestry-making by travelling to Europe to see the great exponents of this art first hand. He departed in July 1965 with the principal aims of visiting the tapestry ateliers in France and Portugal and spending a few weeks in London. What was initially intended to be a three-month visit, however, was extended to a period of nearly two years away from Australia.

On the way, Olsen spent a brief time in New York, where he was struck by the overpowering scale of the architecture, the frantic pace of human activity and the great visual feast in museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He also visited his friend, the sculptor, Clement Meadmore, who had moved to New York in 1963. Olsen wrote back to Australia: 'Clem is just as he was in Sydney - to walk into his studio is to realise we always take ourselves with us - you know how it is - white walls, jazz playing...and then Meadmore's sculptures staring solemnly at one.'[230] Through Meadmore he was introduced to Elaine De Kooning and saw the works of many of the Abstract Expressionists first hand.[231]

From New York, Olsen went to France, where, together with Frank McDonald, he spent several weeks visiting the renowned Gobelins and Aubusson tapestry ateliers. It was at Aubusson, one of the oldest tapestry workshops in Europe, that Jean Lurcat had made a major contribution to the revival of tapestry-making in the twentieth century.[232] They then travelled to Portugal, to the atelier at Portalegre (where Olsen's *Joie de Vivre* tapestry had been woven) and were joined there by the artist Arthur Boyd, who had also become interested in exploring the field of tapestry design in his art.

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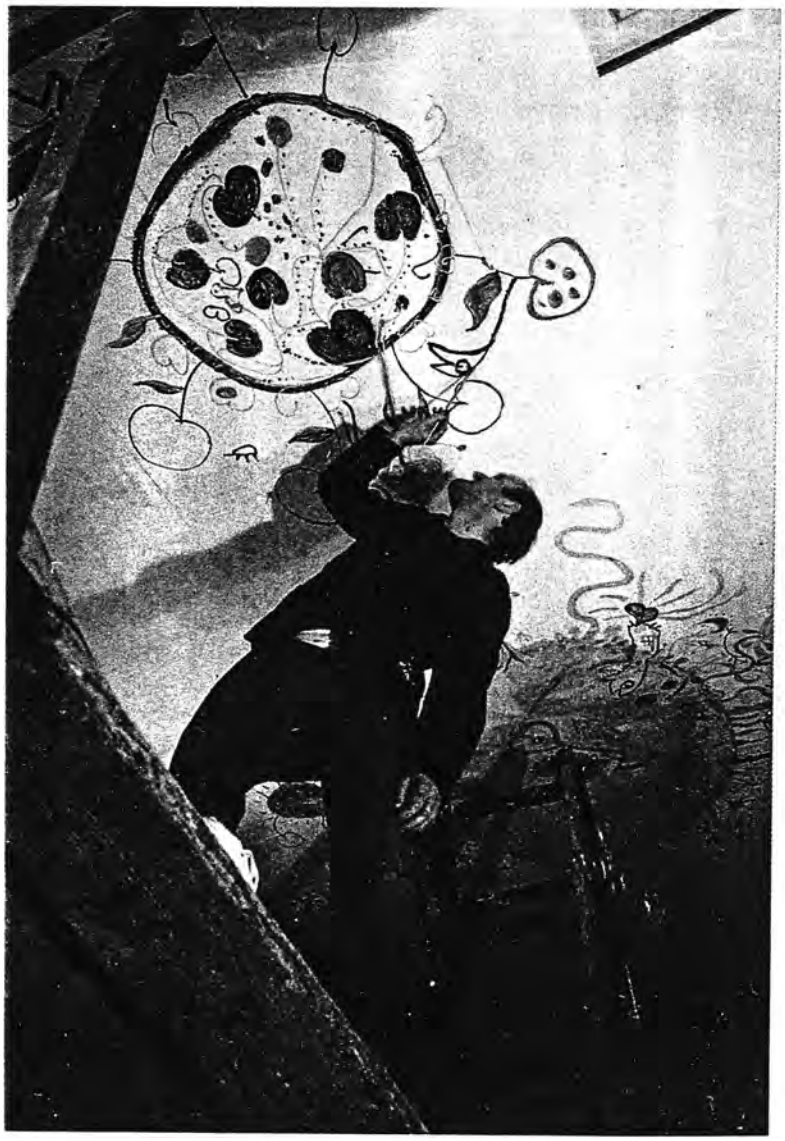
[230] Letter to Daniel Thomas, 29 December 1965.

[231] ibid. Olsen wrote: 'The American artists are now very confident in their powers ... and I share a great respect for what they have done but feel it won't be so big when all the huff and puff is over.'

[232] Lurcat had been appointed by the Ministry of National Education in France in 1939 to officially study with the weavers at Aubusson the possibilities of re-establishing French tapestry on a vigorous and profitable footing. With the eventual liberation of France, followed by peace in 1945, Lurcat astonished the art world by producing, in association with the weavers, 'a vital new form of tapestry'. See Francis Paul Thompson, *Tapestry: A Mirror of History*, Jacaranda Press, Milton, 1980, p.186.



John Olsen working in London on ***Summer in the You Beaut Country No.2***, 1965, oil on plywood panels, 521.4 x 588.4cm, Collection: City of Ballarat Fine Art Gallery. Gift of Patrick Allen, 1976

The Portalegre atelier was continuing a long tradition dating back to 1771, when a weaving mill was established in the former 'Colegio Sao Sebastiao' built by the Jesuits in the seventeenth century. In the twentieth century, the workshop developed a reputation under the management of the firm Francisco Fino Ltd., with each succeeding administration taking pride in keeping their methods up to date and seeking a worldwide market.

John Olsen and Frank McDonald had a preference for the working methods at Portalegre, which they considered more flexible in interpreting the range of the artist's palette than Aubusson.[233] It was also economically more viable. Olsen decided to return to Portugal the following year to work for an extended period with the weavers. The initial visit was an opportunity for familiarisation and the discussion of plans for future tapestries with the head of the workshop, Guy Fino.

Towards the end of August John Olsen and Arthur Boyd travelled to England, by then Boyd's second home. Olsen stayed in London with Frank McDonald's friends, Patrick and Penny Allen, who had commissioned him to paint a ceiling for their home. He lived in the basement flat there for nearly five months and was joined towards the end of September by his wife, Valerie, and two young children, Tim and Louise.

The commission for the Allen household was to continue the theme of *Summer in the You Beaut Country* and Olsen began work on it *in situ* soon after his arrival. Compared with his 1962 ceiling of the same title, this painting revealed the results of his explorations in ceiling painting in the interim period. While retaining the sense of spontaneity in accordance with the subject, it was generally more refined, no doubt also reflecting the environment in which he was now working. From within and around the central mandala form, quite precisely drawn sinuous scrolls and motifs such as fruit and flowers emerged, inhabiting the same environment as his familiar vocabulary of faces, figures and strange creatures. This work also bears comparison with the later tapestry, *Verdure* (pl.56). In October Olsen noted, 'the ceiling looks extraordinarily delicate in the soft English light'.

He continued to work on the ceiling intermittently over the ensuing months and by the end of the year it began to attract the attention of a number of London critics and

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[233] While the Aubusson workshop laid down specific guidelines in relation to the colour range available to artists, the dyeing process available at Portalegre allowed more freedom in the interpretations of an artist's designs.

gallery professionals, including Norman Reid from the Tate Gallery and the art critic for the *Sunday Times*, John Russell. On 29 December, Olsen wrote to Daniel Thomas at the Art Gallery of New South Wales:

> John Russell came the other evening and saw the ceiling and was most enthusiastic, which I appreciated very much, for I think he is the critic with the most integrity here. He took the classic position advised by you - the floor with an occasional sip of whisky...He said he would like me to do one for the Sunday Times boardroom, [however] the obstacles are numerous.[234]

Although by the 1960s New York was widely considered the capital of the art world, when John Olsen arrived in London in 1965 it was still a mecca for many Australian artists. The contingent of his friends living there at the time included Robert Klippel, Leonard Hessing, Peter Upward, Charles Blackman, Brett Whiteley, Colin Lanceley, Martin Sharp and Ron Robertson-Swann.

Since the early 1950s, as a result of the efforts of Sir Kenneth Clark, there had been a considerable number of individual and group exhibitions of Australian art in England and these continued into the 1960s.[235] The director of the Whitechapel Gallery, Bryan Robertson, had followed in Clark's footsteps by initiating the successful 'Recent Australian Painting' exhibition held in London in 1961. His main aim was 'to show the most recent trends in Australian art in the broadest way possible', with an emphasis on the work of younger artists who had not previously exhibited in London.[236] Works by Olsen had been included in this exhibition and also in the 'Commonwealth Art Today' show at the Commonwealth Institute in London in 1962-63 and the 'Australian Painting' exhibition at the Tate Gallery in 1963.[237]

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[234] In a letter to Frank McDonald, 15 December 1965, Olsen wrote that Russell believed that conservative businessmen might object to the proposal of a ceiling for the Sunday Times boardroom. Whatever the reason, it did not eventuate.

[235] As a result of Clark's efforts, English audiences had been exposed to solo exhibitions by Nolan, Drysdale, Tucker and Boyd.

[236] *Recent Australian Painting*, exhibition catalogue, Whitechapel Gallery, London, June-July 1961, p.7.

[237] The specific works by John Olsen included in these exhibitions are listed as follows. 'Recent Australian Painting', Whitechapel Gallery, London, June - July 1961: *Bush Walk* cat.73, *Granada* cat.74 and *Wheels within Wheels* cat.75; 'Commonwealth Art Today', Commonwealth Institute, London, 7 November - 13 January 1963: *In the You Beaut Country No.3* cat.15; 'Australian Painting: Colonial, Impressionist, Contemporary', Tate Gallery, London, 23 January - 3 March 1963: *Western World No.1* cat.160, *Landscape No.1* cat.161 and *Diana's World* cat.162.

While the 'Recent Australian Painting' exhibition had received an overwhelmingly positive response from the critics, by the time of the Tate Gallery exhibition in 1963, the groundswell of opposition to several years of adulation for Australian art had begun.[238] However, if the critical response had become more measured, the number of exhibitions had continued to grow and in the autumn of 1965 there were large shows of the works of Dobell, Blackman, Drysdale and Whiteley.[239]

John Olsen sent an article to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in October 1965 in which he reviewed these exhibitions and commented on the artistic climate in general.[240] He revealed some of the tensions that were current among Australian artists: the rejection by the younger generation of what they considered to be 'the false Australianism' of the older artists, and the shift towards contemporary British and American movements such as Pop art and hard-edge painting.[241] In relation to Olsen's own direction and development this was an unsettling and contradictory period. While he consistently believed that artists should not reject their 'grass roots' or linkages with art of the past, he was also stimulated, at first, by the atmosphere in London and the 'revolution of English art...brand spanking new, crisp and clear as a Picadilly Circus neon'.[242]

John Olsen met one of the initiators of the Pop movement in Britain, the sculptor, Eduardo Paolozzi, whom he admired for his 'intellectual acuity and historical dialect'. In his journal he wrote:

> Wednesday – Travelling on the front of the bus with Paolozzi – Oxford Street 5 o'clock crammed with people. I am interested in process, Paolozzi agreed. We saw a show at Frazer's – Oldenburg, Riley, Eduardo [Paolozzi], Warhol, Dine, the most avant-garde show I have seen in Europe.[243]

However the Pop movement had no direct effect on Olsen's artistic development. Despite his previous interest in the vulgarity and dynamism of city life, his own approach contradicted the technological slickness of much of the Pop artists' work. His previous urbanscapes, such as *Entrance to the Siren City of the Rat Race*

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238 For a summary of overseas appraisals see 'Australian Painting', *Current Affairs Bulletin*, vol.37, no.1, November 22 1965, pp. 3-16.
239 See John Olsen, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 October, 1965.
240 ibid.
241 ibid. John Olsen believed that a number of artists, such as Michael Johnson and the sculptor, Ron Robertson-Swann, were doing more interesting work than their counterparts in Australia who in his estimation were being fed on a diet of international 'glossies'.
242 ibid.
243 Olsen's journal, 21 May, 1966.

(pl.22), were dependent on the painterly process and were closely allied with his personal response to the atmosphere of a particular place.

Olsen's feeling of being at a crossroads in his art was compounded by the fact that he seldom found London a conducive environment in which to work and he produced very little there. Furthermore, at a time when individual American critics in particular were assuming a major and often disproportionate role as the arbiters of art history, Olsen recognised the danger of artists taking up fashionable trends for their own sake. He felt a particular antipathy towards much of the austere, impersonal abstraction widely adopted at the time. In December 1965 Olsen wrote, 'Britain's biggest art prize, the John Moore, depressingly demonstrated how young artists are more than prepared to bend a knee to conformity, to the persuasive droppings of critic and judge, Clement Greenberg'.[244]

It is not surprising that the large Bonnard Retrospective exhibited at the Royal Academy in London during December 1965 provided Olsen with a tremendous source of encouragement in its reassertion of the importance of retaining a personal vision. His comments, written in a review of the exhibition he sent to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, are revealing in relation to his own state of mind at the time:

> With English art settling down to a period of clear, hard-edged and very often puritanical abstraction, up pops Bonnard, the little wizard, gazing from the canvas like an impish Zen monk...
>
> He may be admired by reactionaries and the esoterics alike but he belongs to neither, for between 1941 and 1945, when he painted his last great bathing picture, he was truly avant-garde in the real military sense of the word – going out to look at the enemy's position and bringing back the right information – not fallacies and false promises...
>
> He intrigues us to remember the simple pleasures, to avoid anything canned, including art. This is probably why everyone in the Academy was so animated...for Bonnard had told them it's all right to be yourself.[245]

Unlike many of his Australian friends, John Olsen never felt that he could make England his second home. By December 1965 he felt in 'some kind of purgatory' in London and was 'thirsting for the Mediterranean'. He had remained in England partly because of a proposed commission from the Wool Board there and, after

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[244] John Olsen, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 January 1966.
[245] ibid. There is a sense of Olsen trying to find himself under the pressures of the contemporary art scene in London.

many frustrating and unsuccessful attempts to finalise negotiations, he decided to move to Spain. He accepted an offer of accommodation in a house in Mojacar, close to the Portuguese border, where he planned to work on paintings, drawings and tapestry designs. From this location he could go across to Portugal as the tapestry commissions came through.

Olsen set off with his family around the middle of January, full of hopes and expectations and with no inkling of the disastrous events that were to follow. While motoring through France, about fifteen kilometres outside the small town of Dax, the car skidded on a wet road and hit a tree. In his journal he later recalled blurred images of the car in a V-like shape, 'with the windscreen wipers moving back and forth in a strange equation'. The injuries were severe: John Olsen had a compound fracture to his painting arm and both he and Valerie had broken ribs and damaged lungs. As for the young children, Louise had a broken leg and Tim had concussion and was unconscious for two days.

The whole family was taken to a hospital in Dax, where they remained for several weeks. John Olsen had an operation on his arm, which caused ongoing problems over the following few months. While it first appeared as though they would have to return to Australia, after an initial period of recuperation they finally moved on to the house they had been destined for in Mojacar.

Despite the difficulties, John Olsen's urge to live life to the full had been heightened by recent events, and he was determined to start working. Early in April 1966 he wrote, 'My new work will demonstrate clearly that I don't intend to rest on my laurels – I feel a young painter and, with a glimpse into the corridors of death, more experienced'.[246] Notes in his journal indicate that he was soon absorbing the atmosphere of the place: the market place, the meat and vegetable stalls – 'sad purples and aubergines – the acid green of pimentos, the granular salt of thick chunks of pork, electric colours of plastic trinkets, the white of goats cheese'.

Olsen was impressed by the religious festivals, as he had been on his first visit to Spain. In his journal he noted the altar set up in the plaza, or village square, where his children took their first communion. It was probably around this time that he painted *Altar* (pl.52), in which broad areas of vibrating reds and blues relate to his explorations of the expressive and constructive possibilities of colour. As in *The Chapel* (fig.37), painted a few months later in Portugal, there is a shift away from

[246] Letter to Frank McDonald, April 1966.

the insistent calligraphic line of his earlier work towards bold, rhythmical structures and symmetrical compositions. In both places he was inspired by the local folk art, with its simplified forms, bright colours and decorative motifs.

After returning to London for another operation on his arm, John Olsen and his family went on to Portugal, on this occasion travelling by boat from Southampton to Lisbon. From there they caught the night train to the enchanting town of Castelo de Vide (Castle of Life), about fifteen kilometres north of Portalegre in Alentejo Province. As a result of threats of invasion by the Spaniards and Moors, the Alentejo province is characterised by its wealth of fortresses and castles. In Castelo de Vide, the town's narrow streets, lined with whitewashed houses occasionally decorated with Gothic and Manueline doorways, meander up to the ruined castle which has become the village centre.

The Olsens stayed there for four months in a hotel called the 'Casa de Parque', which provided meals and local wine for the whole family for approximately four pounds a day. During the first week there, John Olsen found a studio to rent in an empty shop with several rooms for painting, drawing and writing. He began working towards two exhibitions planned for the following year on his return to Australia – one at Clune Galleries in Sydney and the other at South Yarra Gallery in Melbourne. Because of the difficulties of transporting large paintings, he decided to work predominantly on a modest scale.

From the time of his arrival in Portugal, John Olsen's art, journal notes and letters reveal the tremendous sense of relief he felt to be away from the dictates of public opinion – of what was or was not fashionable in the art world. His facility to absorb and express the atmosphere surrounding him was stimulated by the fund of images, sights and sounds he discovered in the regional village atmosphere of Castelo de Vide. This was a place where Olsen's poetic imagination could come alive, where fact and fantasy appeared as one. He was enamoured by the 'story-book reality of the beautiful town', with its monthly market days and stalls spread across the square – shoes, pots, painted plates, material and women with hens for sale in baskets lined up against the white church wall.

Olsen wanted to capture the feeling of the place as closely as possible, and began from a figurative basis, making notes and drawings of the aspects of life which interested him. In October 1966 he wrote in a letter:

> I have just had the most beautiful day painting – a beautiful thing developing into a head attached to a spoon going into a large hungry mouth with lots of teeth...Castillo de Vide [sic] better than ever all the big fundamental rhythms laid out – 2 mad women dominate the town...Blind people clasping each other - donkeys being shod and a big windlass firing the hearth, meat being hung in the street, the spirit of the fountain – lots of unbelievable poetry - the Castle of Life has many secrets. – Every day I try to listen to her heart.[247]

In Olsen's *Portuguese Kitchen* paintings (pls.53 and 54), locally observed reality, playful humour and fantasy are inextricably intertwined. In *Portuguese Kitchen No.1*, the soft, sensuous, pastel colours and decorative blue and white checked tablecloth are reminiscent of Bonnard. However, there is also a strong psychic, surreal component epitomised by the central head attached to octopus-like tentacles which variously become a decorated snake, a big, soft yellow shoe and a wooden spoon. Here, Olsen's intuitive exploration of an empathy and involvement with the ingredients and acts of cooking and feeding is disarmingly complete.

It was probably *Portuguese Kitchen No.2* that Olsen was referring to at the start of his letter. The chef's head attached to a large wooden spoon is feeding another mouth, and both are surrounded by a vibrant medley of creatures, figures and objects. Here the inspiration of Portuguese folk art is more pronounced in the strident colours and decorative motifs. It reflects a typical Portuguese kitchen, serving as both a dining room and communal living room, in which household fittings, generally made out of wood, are often decorated with flower patterns on bright red, blue or yellow grounds.[248]

The 'big fundamental rhythms' that Olsen wrote of were also translated in the numerous charcoal and gouache drawings of fairs, the blacksmith's shop, a kettle on the boil and rainy days. During October 1966 there was a period of incessant rain and Olsen noted in his journal, 'Rain and mist pass over the town, the town puts on its bed socks, smothers itself in dripping umbrellas'. In drawings such as *Rainy Paseo* (fig.38) he recreates the mood, not by subtle atmospherics, but by the inventive application of clearly delineated, vigorous shapes which tumble into one another. As in *The Fair* (fig.39), the bold contrasts of black against white and the melding, interconnecting forms recall some of the village-inspired works based on memories of Spain at the start of the decade.

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247 Letter to Frank McDonald, 9 October 1966.

248 For more detailed information on Portuguese folk art see H.J. Hansen (ed.), *European Folk Art*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1968.

During the last few months of 1966, Olsen worked closely with the tapestry weavers at Portalegre. In the course of the previous months he had been developing designs for three new tapestries: *Nude with Clock* (pl.55), *Yellow Summer* and *Verdure* (pl.56). In 1965 he had been informed that the Art Gallery of Western Australia was interested in acquiring a tapestry from a new edition and that he had received a commission for the Australia Square building in Sydney designed by Harry Seidler.[249] Olsen decided that the public spaces in which the tapestries would be hung precluded the need for concentrated attention from the viewer and that the works should be monumental in their formal implications. This coincided with his developing interest in dynamic structure, reflected in paintings like *Altar.*

This structural emphasis is reflected in *Nude with Clock*, in which the striking, simplified shapes and curving, sensual silhouettes recall some of Matisse's late cut-outs. However, as in *Yellow Summer*, there is an obvious formal restraint, a curbing of Olsen's characteristic spontaneity, which separates these works from the earlier tapestry, *Joie de Vivre*. Stylistically, *Verdure* is more animated than the other designs of the mid-1960s. In the application of decorative flowers, fruits and heart shapes, as well as calligraphic lines, it recalls the London ceiling painting, *Summer in the You Beaut Country*. *Verdure* was also a contemporary adaptation of a traditional tapestry theme going back to the Middle Ages, when flowers and vegetation dominated and secular tapestry turned to love and chivalry.

As in the tradition of Persian weaving, it was decided that texture should be minimised in these works so as not to interfere with the directness of colour. However, compared with his paintings and later tapestries, the hues were more subtle, with bright shapes and motifs set against rather muted grounds.

John Olsen found the experience of working directly with the tapestry weavers enlightening. He was fascinated by the way they translated designs in terms of the grid mesh of the paper. In the early period he listened and observed as the weavers gradually moved from one stage to another in the development of his designs. As his confidence increased and a rapport developed, the working relationship became more dynamic and intense. He wrote of this experience in his catalogue introduction for his forthcoming exhibition in Australia:

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[249] Frank McDonald wrote to Olsen on 4 April 1966: '[Harry Seidler] thinks it should be "read" from the opposite side of the street, not have a lot of detail but brilliant colour, one word he used was "monumental".'

> To modern artists continually exposed to the exigencies of individual talent it is a most rewarding experience. We would meet in the vast whitewashed atelier in the early morning, tapestry designs laid on the floor, and the craftsmen would begin to dissect the implications of the design for tapestry – even down to the individual thread. Would we, for example in a passage that was predominantly yellow, introduce a single thread of blue into the thread? I could not help exclaiming, 'But that's pointillism!'. Their reply was typical: 'We don't know about that sir, but that's how it was done in the seventeenth century'.
>
> In my opinion, Tapecarias de Portalegre are the best dyers in Europe. Whilst the weaving studio is just as it ever was, the dying works are extremely modern and electronically controlled. They suit my aims admirably.

By the end of 1966, Olsen began to make preparations to return to Australia. Before departing from Portugal in 1967, he was invited to show his paintings in the Town Hall. The town crier went around the streets calling, '*O, Senor Olsen invitar os personas do Castel de Vide a vener o expociane...*'.[250]

John Olsen and his family left Europe in February 1967 aboard the *Oriana*, which sailed from Gibraltar, arriving in Australia on 3 March. They were pleasantly surprised to find James Gleeson on board giving lectures on Australian art. During the voyage Olsen wrote, 'Sailing across the Red Sea. The *Oriana* is a superb ship... all in all we will be pleased to get home again'.

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RETURN TO AUSTRALIA

During Olsen's absence in Portugal, Frank McDonald had bought Terry Clune's share in Clune Galleries and relocated the gallery from Potts Point to Macquarie Street in the city. The new premises was launched in March 1967, the month of the Olsen's return to Sydney, and it was there that the exhibition 'Entrance to the Castle of Life: John Olsen 66 – 67' opened on 9 May 1967. The show was accompanied by a lavish catalogue in the form of a poster, with a gouache drawing by Olsen on the front and an introductory essay on the reverse in what was becoming his characteristic handwritten script. He also designed a banner to hang outside the gallery. James Gleeson wrote enthusiastically about the show, making particular mention of the *Portuguese Kitchen* paintings:

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[250] Laurie Thomas, *Australian*, 29 April 1967.

> It is impossible to think of any other painter today who conveys so rich and full a sense of the joys and mysteries of life...Radiance is incredibly yet convincingly combined with earthiness; things as mundane as a Portuguese kitchen are painted with the incandescence of a nova.[251]

Wallace Thornton reminded viewers of the underlying discipline in Olsen's work: 'With responsive and inflective touch he imposes his personality as if he sang and danced through it all...but one knows...even if the effect is brilliant intuition, the knowledge and discipline that underlie the magic'.[252] However, like Elwyn Lynn, he felt that the restraint of tapestries such as *Nude with a Clock* were removed from the highest quality of this artist's impressive talents.[253]

John Olsen's subsequent exhibition at South Yarra Gallery in Melbourne was favourably reviewed by Alan McCulloch. However, Patrick McCaughey (writing for the *Age*), who was an ardent supporter of new developments, perceived few advances in Olsen's work and believed that 'one can't practice spontaneity in perpetuity'. He also made an unfavourable comparison between the colour in Olsen's tapestries and the work of American artists Ellsworth Kelly and Barnett Newman.[254]

Olsen's romantic temperament and figurative imagery were out of favour with a number of younger artists and gallery professionals at the time. By 1967 there had been an emphatic shift in Australia towards the new modes of abstraction. When Olsen arrived in the country early in the year, he saw the Perth Prize at the Art Gallery of Western Australia and was disappointed by the vast number of what he considered 'pale imitations' by Australian artists of their European and American counterparts.[255] Olsen believed that artists should leave themselves open to current developments but considered that art needed to go through a tremendous filtering process in order to attain authenticity.[256]

One of the major debates that had been developing in the 1960s was the dichotomy between regionalism and internationalism. 'Regionalism' had come to refer to anything that related to the country of origin and was generally viewed with contempt by many who were following hard-edge and colour-field painting. The

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[251] *Sun* (Sydney), 10 May 1967.
[252] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 May 1967.
[253] ibid. and *Bulletin*, 29 July 1967.
[254] *Age*, 26 July 1967.
[255] See April Hersey, *Bulletin*, 25 March 1967.
[256] Craig McGregor, *In the Making*, Thomas Nelson, Melbourne, 1969, pp.240, 241.

latter were grouped under the label of 'internationalism', meaning essentially the spread of ideas from New York and London. A significant aspect of the mood of the times was the extent of the rejection of Australia's recent past.[257]

Artists like John Olsen, who aspired to local content (be it in Australia or Portugal) were pejoratively tagged as nationalist or provincial. Olsen recalls: 'They gave us a really hard time. What I was doing was completely out of vogue and I was discarded like a dirty boot'. For fear of appearing *retardare*, disassociation was the common course of action among those who looked towards the new. The Cultural Cringe was alive and well. The Clement Greenberg flagship had arrived but, ironically, when this American critic did visit Australia, it was the very artists his followers so determinedly rejected that he most admired.[258]

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THE BAKERY SCHOOL

Early in 1968, John Olsen decided to open the Bakery Art School in Paddington. He recalls that, despite the sales of his pictures, with a family to provide for and the expense of his children's school education ahead, he still felt economically insecure. Furthermore, the idea of establishing an art school had been a dream of his for some time and he wanted to run it according to the French atelier system – to create a feeling of informality and vitality, within which an underlying discipline would prevail.

There were no regular advertisements for classes because Olsen wanted to gradually build the school's reputation and to generate confidence in his students, who began to arrive as the news of the school's existence spread. By early 1968 it was up and running. In March of that year the *Bulletin* noted that there were fifty part-time students, three full-time students on Olsen scholarships, and fifteen children who attended Saturday morning classes.[259]

In his teaching, John Olsen wanted the emphasis to be on drawing which he saw as being very much downgraded at the time:

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257 See Gary Catalano, *The Years of Hope: Australian Art and Criticism*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1981.
258 Clifton Pugh, interview with the author. See also Bernard Smith, *The Critic as Advocate: Selected Essays 1941-1988*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1989, pp. 313, 314.
259 *Bulletin*, 9 March 1968.

> The philosophy behind the school was drawing from the figure, because I felt when you are learning to draw, you are having a course in humanity...all of my students in the end drew well – they never forgot it for this reason. Even though, apart from a few people, many were not highly creative talents...they could be graphically all right. They could sit down and draw things and I think that when you can do this, you can always get some satisfaction from it.

Olsen attempted to give his students a broad basis from which to develop, referring to art history through art books he ordered from Angela Childs at her Paddington bookshop. The subjects were often quite diverse and disparate and included Archaic Greek sculpture, Giorgio Morandi and Paul Klee. Matisse was frequently referred to in relation to drawing, as a valuable source of inspiration. However, if these sources were the catalysts, Olsen also expected his students to develop their own expressive potential.

One of the full-time scholarship students, Virginia Carroll, who attended Olsen's classes in the early 1960s, found him an inspirational teacher. She recalled the constant discipline of life drawing and studying from nature. 'He would say, "It doesn't matter how abstract it appears to be, when you dry up, go back to nature".'

The building, an old bakery which had been purchased by the Clunes, consisted of two levels, with most of the classes being held upstairs, while below, in the area where the baker's ovens were located, lunches and dinners were frequently held. Carroll remembers Olsen's generosity not only in his teaching, but in the atmosphere he created:

> John was just amazing. He would start the class – maybe we started at 10.00 or 10.30 a.m...Walk in and out, talk with each person. Then, at twelve, he would go off to have a drink and to buy lunch. Say he was going to buy garlic prawns (he had an electric frying pan) – he'd go and buy the prawns and butter and lemon and bread. He would go off by himself (or with a cohort) and would always come back accompanied by others, like a magnet...I remember him making wonderful things like *Fabada Hispania* (a stewy thing)... and then there would be barbecues in the back courtyard.[260]

The students also had access to other artists conducting some of the classes, including Bill Rose, David Aspden and Janet Dawson.

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[260] Virginia Carroll (Glover), interview with the author.

During most of 1968, John Olsen gave a considerable amount of time and energy to the Bakery School. He was there for a large part of the week, and the days and nights of teaching, cooking and socialising depleted his resources for his own work which, as a consequence, suffered during this period.

In the broader context, Olsen felt increasingly disillusioned with the atmosphere in the art world, and the earlier excitement he had felt about the city of Sydney had begun to tarnish (at least for the time being). As he later commented:

> I really love the light and atmosphere and the laissez-faire life style. But I am also very aware that it is a blue bitch...I know its destructive force and still think it can destroy people by seducing them. It's basically a very undisciplined city and underneath it, for all its brilliance, it doesn't love. It's careless with its people. At a certain point after I had become well known I could see myself becoming sucked into this vacuum, this bluey ooze, and it was a terrifying feeling.[261]

By the end of the year it was evident that a break from Sydney would be of benefit to John Olsen and his family, and the decision was taken to move to Victoria - to Clifton Pugh's bush property, 'Dunmoochin'.

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[261] John Olsen, interview with the author.

fig.36 *BonnardI* 1987, ink on paper, 20 x 21cm. Private collection
John Olsen's admiration for Bonnard continued from the 1960s
through the following decades as a number of drawings in the 1980s reveal.
[See also Chapter 12]

The chapel and village of Castelo de Vide (Rue da Fonte) above

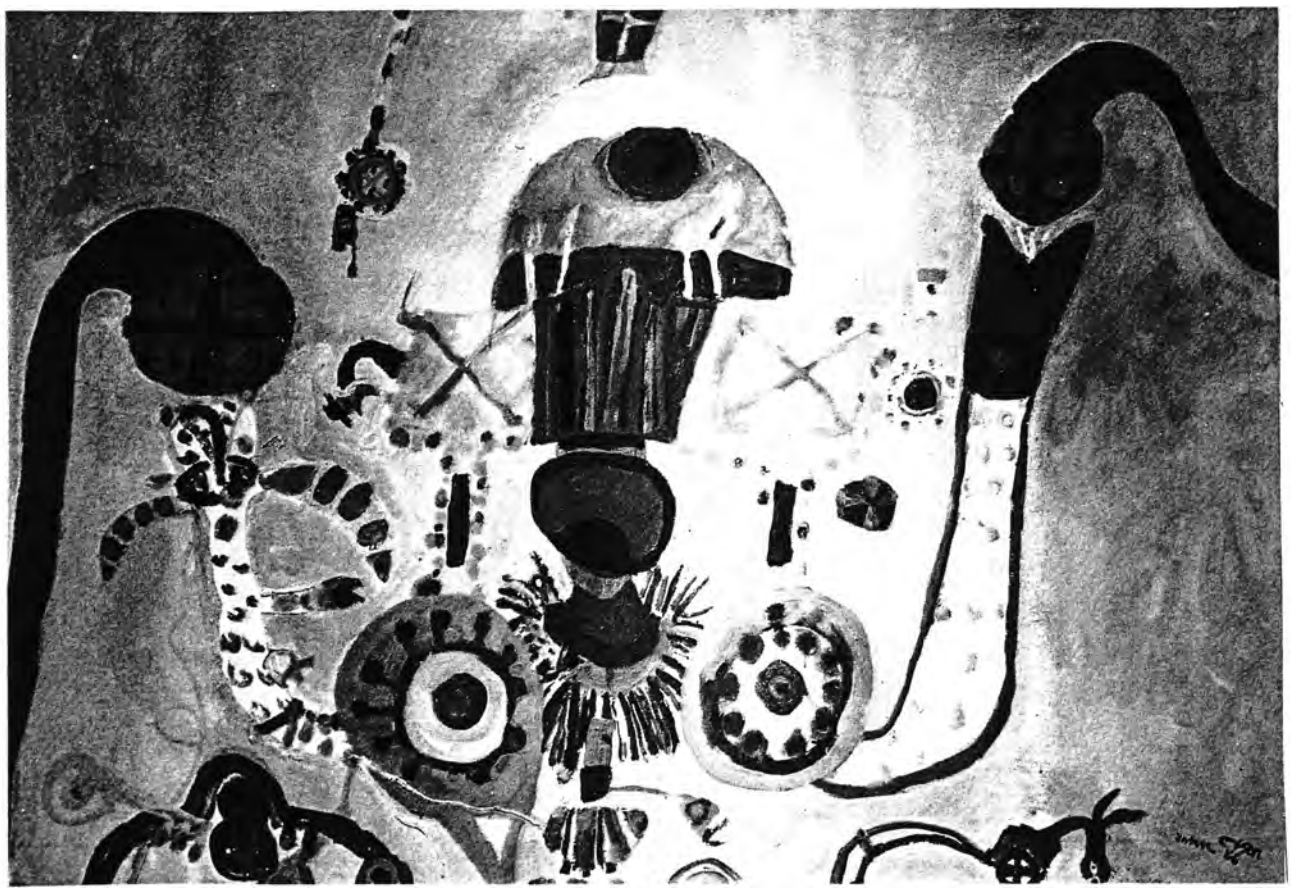

fig.37 *The Chapel* 1966, synthetic polymer paint on hardboard, 59 x 99.5cm
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. Gift of Patrick White 1973

fig.38 *Rainy Paseo* 1966, gouache on paper, 76 x 110cm. Private collection

fig.39 *The Fair* 1966, charcoal on paper, 50 x 65cm. Collection: Ray Hughes Gallery

fig.40 *Entrance to the Castle of Life* 1967, exhibition poster for John Olsen's exhibition at Clune Galleries in 1967.

pl.52 *Altar* 1966, oil on canvas, 99.4 x 79.8cm
Collection: Newcastle Region Art Gallery

pl.53 *Portuguese Kitchen No.1* 1966, oil on board, 94.5 x 125cm
Private collection

pl.54 *Portuguese Kitchen No.2* 1966, oil on canvas, 122 x 182.8cm. Private collection

pl.55 *Nude with Clock* 1966, tapestry, 153 x 203cm
Designed by John Olsen, woven at the
Portalegre Tapestry Workshop, Portugal

John Olsen with the tapestry weavers
at the Portalegre Tapestry Workshop, Portugal

pl.56 *Verdure* 1966, tapestry, 152 x 207cm
Designed by John Olsen, woven at the Portalegre Tapestry Workshop, Portugal
Collection: Westpac Banking Corporation

pl. 57 *Round and about the Harbour* 1967,
pastel, gouache and watercolour on paper, 79 x 77cm
Private collection

CHAPTER 7

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH THE LANDSCAPE DUNMOOCHIN:1969 - 1971

I was forty, which in the arts is like billabong time. A billabong is the story of a disappointed river. It was a period of recasting thinking.

John Olsen

By the beginning of 1969, John Olsen and his family were living in the Victorian countryside of Cottlesbridge, about 33 kilometres north-west of Melbourne. It was here, in the early 1950s, that the artist, Clifton Pugh, and a small group of people had instigated the community settlement called Dunmoochin. Pugh's house there had been a regular meeting place for the Antipodean group, and Arthur Boyd, Charles Blackman and John Perceval had painted in the area. Perceval had bought land there, and although he never lived on the property, it continued to be referred to by Olsen and Pugh on their painting excursions as 'Perceval's Hill'. The move was timely for Olsen because he felt, at least for the time being, that the impetus of Sydney had run its course: 'I felt at a crisis time in my career, I felt that the work I had been doing in my thirties had come to an end'.

The Cottlesbridge landscape, characterised by dusty, rolling hills, eucalypts, bright-yellow wattles and numerous spherical dams, now became a major source of inspiration for his painting. In general his contact with the bush landscape resulted in a shift away from the overt exuberance of his earlier work to a more contemplative and lyrical response. Aside from the brief stay at Hill End and Yarramalong in 1962 and 1963, he had not spent a consistent period of time working in the rural landscape. He comments:

> It was an interesting thing for me. When I came back from Spain it was Hill End and I really felt comfortable there. And somehow the transference from Spain to Hill End was okay. Then I got involved in Sydney...When I came to Clif's place there was that Australian reality. I had written back from Spain about the Riverina but, apart from Hill End, I hadn't really been looking at what was the classical Australian landscape.[262]

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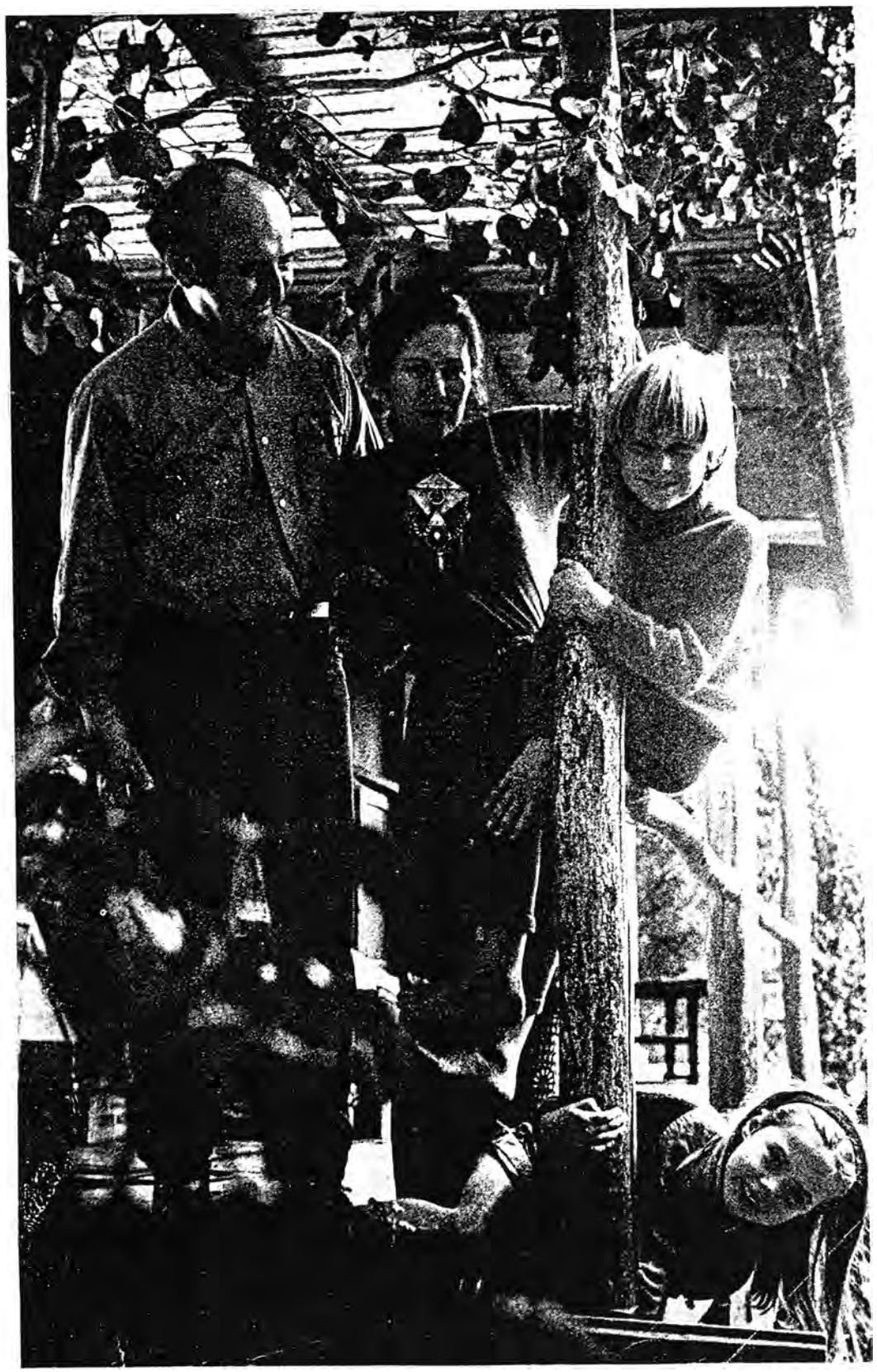
[262] John Olsen, interview with the author.



John and Valerie Olsen with their children, Tim and Louise, at Dunmoochin

The Olsen family were to remain in Dunmoochin for two years, until early 1971. They lived in one of the mud brick and wattle and daub houses scattered around the property which appeared to merge with the natural environment. The living conditions were rather Spartan. They all lived initially in one room, with no electricity, a fuel stove and an outside 'dunny'. The children, Tim and Louise Olsen, recall the period with mixed feelings. They enjoyed the freedom of being on a large property, swimming in the dams and painting in the landscape with their parents and other artists. However, they also remember the uncomfortable quarters for a family of four, the bitterly cold winters and the frequent flooding of their home during rainy periods.

Much of the activity at Dunmoochin centred around Clifton Pugh's house, where he lived with his wife at the time, Marlene, and their two sons, Shane and Dailan. John Olsen often worked with Pugh in his studio and in the area directly around the house. From time to time they organised life-drawing sessions, and they also painted impromptu still lifes, occasionally in the company of Fred Williams.[263] In 1969, the atmosphere at the Pugh household fluctuated between great warmth and creativity and domestic tensions and arguments. 'Clif was a bit of a crazy man in those days', Louise Olsen recalls. 'He used to get really angry and he and Marlene were very boisterous and loud. They would be fuming and they didn't worry too much about other people being around.'[264]

This was the background to an exceptional work for the period, *Love in the Kitchen* (pl.58). The erratic, calligraphic line moving over the broad, flatly painted areas, vibrant colour and dense array of images are a summation of his previous work. They represent a continuation of his *Portuguese Kitchens*, but the emotive content is more complex. Here, Olsen combines irrational humour, vulnerability and friction with the dramatic flair of a stage director. The work itself is constructed like a stage set, a narrative in disguise in which clues are discovered in the accumulation of figurative motifs: the cracked, bright orange-yellow egg, the crazed-looking face with a heart coming out of it, and the tiny, isolated figure pacing the floorboards, silhouetted against a desert landscape. Numbers, letters and words are employed for their visual appeal as well as their associative connotations, such as 'oops fallin in'. Olsen once said, 'On the edge of most humour is a tragedy, a factor which Charlie

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263 See James Mollison, *A Singular Vision: The Art of Fred Williams*, Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1989, p.151. Mollison notes that numerous still lifes by Williams '...were made as subjects presented themselves - for example a brace of guinea fowls, brought in by John Olsen to cook for dinner'.

264 Louise Olsen, interview with the author.

Chaplin exploited beautifully'. In its own way, much the same can be said of *Love in the Kitchen.*

From early in 1969, Olsen began to paint out of doors on a regular basis, frequently accompanied on excursions into the bush by Pugh, Fred Williams and, on occasion, Albert Tucker. On 22 February 1969, John Olsen wrote in a letter to Rudy Komon: 'Freddy is coming up next week to paint...we are very happy here – we work every day, what a blessing after Sydney. I still swim every morning in the Paris end of Dunmoochin'.

The landscape now became Olsen's studio. He painted gouaches as well as large canvases out in the open and would usually tie his canvas to a tree or occasionally place it flat on the ground. The landforms, light, atmosphere and plant life were a rich source of visual and experiential information on which to draw. Olsen was intent on capturing the look and feel of the environment and its essential rhythms, or what he called 'its life force'. However, his imaginative response was also directed by the dynamics of the painting process itself as the marks, shapes and images gradually evolved on the canvas. He was less concerned with accurate description than with inferring the mood of the whole to reach a particular poetic sensibility.

The title of Olsen's large oil, *Pied Beauty* (pl.59) is derived from that of Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem, which had been a motivation for *Dappled Country* (pl.35) painted six years earlier. In both instances, through the fragmentation of form and stippling of paint, Olsen captures Hopkins's multifarious evocations of nature. As Elwyn Lynn aptly commented: 'The poetry that he admires coalesces images as he does; the sudden disruption in their syntax parallels his intuitive innovations'.[265] The particularities of the landscape are suggested in their different colouration – the rich, moist farming country at Yarramalong in the earlier work, as opposed to the drier, dusty landscape spotted with bright wattle at Cottlesbridge. As in many of the works of this period, the spatial orientation has altered considerably, towards a vertical directional movement, and the suggestion of a high horizon line. Also compared with the earlier work, here the tangled web of lines and images has given way to a greater spatial amplitude and lightness of touch.

One of the most distinctive features of these later works is the absence of human figuration. Olsen considered that, unlike a great deal of European landscape painting where the figure is in the foreground, in the rural Australian situation the figure

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[265] Elwyn Lynn, *The Australian Landscape and its Artists*, Bay Books, Sydney, 1977, p.154.

could only be a minor factor. This led him to abandon the accumulation of disparate images, still found in *Love in the Kitchen*, in favour of a paring away of inessentials, a simplification of forms and a greater homogeneity of purpose.

In *Wattle and moon* (pl.60), as in *Pied Beauty*, the sense of vitality is no longer attained by the long, calligraphic lines, but by rhythmical, fluid, curling shapes and staccato marks which spring upwards and outwards over the broadly painted, layered grounds. The ambience of the landscape under a rising moon in *Wattle and moon*, is given substance by the agile, honey-coloured markings silhouetted against the dark earth. The magical serenity of this work, and the structural emphasis of the landform which suggests the curve of the earth, continues in the tradition of David Davies's *Moonrise at Templestowe*, 1894, and the more recent crepuscules of Lloyd Rees.[266]

For Olsen, the opportunity to paint with his contemporaries in the landscape was a rewarding experience. He recalled that, when they went out painting, he and Williams would have paint all over themselves, whereas Tucker always appeared in immaculate clothes and would shield his work from the others. As Olsen commented, 'I guess that was the conceptual side of Tucker, that he wasn't going to reveal any strengths or weaknesses'. In his journal he described one of their painting days together:

> Beautiful sunshine. We went out this morning to paint at Church Road. Freddy working very rapidly, and he scratched about never really settling...taking another piece of thick watercolour paper, lacing it with masking tape to make an elongated format...[Me] standing there with an easel tied to a log feeling like a typical 19th-century painter, trying to wring out of the wretched landscape some sort of image, excitement – ferment of a new life force in myself if it goes – if only it can...Tucker sitting in the car saying, 'I'll jump bash or tear it to make the bloody...thing work'.

Thus, at the very time when the trend in the art world was towards non-referential painting, Olsen and his contemporaries were continuing the tradition of gaining insights from the Australian landscape. Olsen recalls that it was particularly Pugh and himself who were seen as being most out of favour at the time: 'Patrick McCaughey was the critic for the *Age* and he was promoting 'The Field'...He ruled the roost...The kind of pictures we were doing were completely out of fashion... We were prepared to go out and look and search for other values'.[267] McCaughey

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[266] See Robert Hughes, *The Art of Australia*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1986, p.77.
[267] John Olsen, interview with the author.

saw it as ironic that Williams spent a lot of time working with Olsen and Pugh. As he later wrote:

> Pugh and Olsen represented all that was most antipathetic to the new mood of the sixties. Their romantic nationalism was exactly what the new generation of painters found most objectionable in established Australian painters. Williams's increasingly spare and abstract forms were the antithesis of the regional particularity that Pugh and Olsen romanticised. The more Williams concentrated on summing up the sixties, the wider the gap between him and his contemporaries became.[268]

Certainly it is true that, since 1968, Williams had been moving towards a more reductive way of painting, probably partly inspired by minimalism and colour-field painting. However, it was during this same period that he resumed his outdoor sketching trips, often working in oils rather than gouache, something he had rarely done before.[269] Thus, like Olsen and Pugh (and unlike the New York artists), he was clearly continuing a tradition of transforming and "'abstracting from nature", by which all artists whether classic or romantic, traditional or modern, admit nature to their art'.[270]

Furthermore, although the works that these artists produced were quite distinctively their own, Williams and Olsen both shared the view of the landscape as multi-dimensional, as being all around them, at variance with Pugh who saw it as more uniformly 'close up'.[271] There were also commonalities in their abbreviated, animated signs suggesting trees and bushes over the landscape; a rich mark-making which Olsen had begun to incorporate in works of the early 1960s. However, Olsen's work *was*, in a broader sense, more openly romantic and expressive, more directly associated with a poetry and metaphor; as he put it, 'with dragging certain images out of the landscape'.[272]

Although there were occasionally inevitable tensions between the artists, the general atmosphere was one of shared enthusiasm. John Olsen's young daughter, Louise,

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[268] Patrick McCaughey, *Fred Williams*, Bay Books, Sydney, 1984, p.212.
[269] Mollison, op.cit., p.137.
[270] Bernard Smith, *The Critic as Advocate: Selected Essays 1941-1988*, op.cit., p.309.
[271] Traudi Allen, *Patterns of a Lifetime: Clifton Pugh*, Thomas Nelson, Melbourne, 1981, p.52 (from an interview with John Olsen, 28 June 1978).
[272] While Williams's works were generally characterised by a greater sense of order and discipline, an exceptional later work which indicates a more irrational, metaphorical response to the bush is *The Stump*, 1976, see Mollison, p.209.

sometimes joined their painting excursions, along with her mother and brother. She has quite vivid memories of the period:

> That was such an extraordinary thing for those three men to be out there painting together...The way they would talk in the landscape together. They were quite different and isolated in a sense but there was a great relationship and rapport going on while they were working. They had wine and olives and picnic things and they would paint for a while and sit down and have tea, or mostly wine and olives and really talk to each other. Just being in the landscape and looking with each other...and what they produced at the end of the day [was that] they brought different insights into the landscape.[273]

Olsen executed many gouaches out of doors during this period. They were generally exploratory in nature and, in examples such as *Clouds and the Earth* (pl.61) and *Mallee Country* (pl.63) the brush appears to be seeking out interrelated shapes, shadows and markings over the landscape; integrating sky and earth. In a sense, his approach to mark-making was like a Rorschach test, 'the blots and markings aiding the memory of things and of other times, a series of metaphors and double implications'.[274] Olsen's comments in an art class he conducted in Tasmania around this time provide revealing insights into his own methods of working:

> In the beginning it is important to explore with paint in order to find 'one's think' - to lay up a rich bed of marks to select from. One should leave oneself open to 'doodle' because new contexts are not available through constrictive means...Therefore be flexible and open in the early part of the painting and have a sympathy for the rhythm within and without. Sometimes it is good to work on the floor where you can hunt and stalk from various angles. How will I know what I want to say until I am in the middle of it? Extend out of the moment and keep alive the vitality of that moment for the spectator to enjoy. Infer - don't describe. The painting will contain its own inferences and images which slide in and out and look after themselves.[275]

During 1969 and 1970, John Olsen travelled around Victoria and painted numerous gouaches and oils around the Mallee district. Jeparit, a wheat town near Horsham, was one of his favourite locations. He would often work quite rapidly on sketches before painting in oils. In 1970 he wrote in his journal: 'Jeparit very cold but we stick it out...we keep on working. At the end of the day I have completed 6 gouaches'. In *Jeparit* (pl.62) and *Mallee Country* (pl.63), Olsen recreates the pale,

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[273] Louise Olsen, interview with the author.
[274] *John Olsen's Notebook*, collected and arranged by T.J. Woodward, based on a series of workshops conducted by Olsen in 1969, 1975 and 1976 at the 'Grange', Campbell Town, Tasmania.
[275] ibid.

sandy colouration of the district and explores new, inventive compositional formats. In *Jeparit*, he extracts a slice of the landscape, clearly defining its edge, along which lucid, fantastic shapes appear to cavort. In the related work, *Mallee Country*, signs of human domestication appear amidst the coalescing grey-green shapes, set against the creamy ground of the open landscape.

In April 1969, John Olsen had his first solo exhibition with Rudy Komon at his gallery in Paddington, Sydney. Komon and Olsen had been friends since the early 1960s but it was not until after his 1967 exhibitions that he was persuaded to make the move from Clune Galleries. One of the attractions of Rudy Komon's approach to running his gallery was his aim to foster the sense of a community of artists, including a number of Olsen's Melbourne friends such as Clifton Pugh, Len French and Fred Williams.

The critics were quick to respond to the changes in Olsen's work since leaving Sydney in his 'Dunmoochin Summer' exhibition at the Rudy Komon Gallery. James Gleeson, like Laurie Thomas, made special mention of the new subtleties in works such as *Pied Beauty*. Gleeson wrote:

> Whenever an artist advances into new territory, it is certain he will lose something of value...It remains to determine whether the gains exceed the losses, and there can be little doubt that they do.
>
> No one but Olsen could have painted them but they show us an Olsen we would never have imagined from the evidence of his earlier painting. The essence of the earlier Olsens lay in their immediacy... Now he has become rather more meditative.
>
> The enthusiasm is there but he gives himself time to reflect upon it and to probe a little deeper into its source. The resulting landscapes must be ranked among the most beautiful ever painted in this country.[276]

During 1969 and 1970, John Olsen also had his first solo exhibitions in Adelaide, at the White Studio Gallery, and in Brisbane, at the Reid Gallery. Although the standard of the works in these exhibitions was uneven, they generally included a few inventive gouaches and at least a couple of major oils. One of these, shown in Brisbane in 1970, was the memorable painting, *The Chasing Bird Landscape* (pl.64), which had won the Wynne Prize at the Art Gallery of New South Wales the previous year.

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[276] *Sun* (Sydney), 24 April 1969.

The Chasing Bird Landscape was begun out of doors on Melbourne Cup Day 1969, when Olsen was working with Clifton Pugh in the landscape looking over to 'Perceval's Hill'. The paring away of inessentials and limited palette make this a tougher, more concentrated work than some of the other Dunmoochin landscapes. The tonal shifts of fawns, creamy ochres and rich, dark browns create the impression of the parched, dusty landscape in summer. As opposed to the impetuosity of some of the earlier works, the paint is built up in a series of thinly applied, delicate glazes. The animistic, nervous calligraphy which traces the shape of a steep hill, subtly suggests the interconnections between land, plant life and the creatures which inhabit it. At the time of the Archibald and Wynne Prizes in 1969, Laurie Thomas wrote:

> The outstanding painting is John Olsen's [The] Chasing Bird Landscape. It is a work of simple majesty that lifts it right out of the class of landscape reporting and makes it into a work of art, imaginatively and visually exciting in its own right. It recreates the landscape in a way unknown in the Wynne Prize for years.[277]

Despite this success, Olsen was continually plagued by doubts about his sense of direction in the early 1970s. With new gains made on the one hand there was also a certain sense of loss and a struggle to find a clear way forward. In May of that year he noted in his journal that he was visited by the young dealer from Australian Galleries, Stuart Purves, 'He relieved my anxieties a lot by being most enthusiastic about my work'.

Although Olsen was interested in exhibiting again in Melbourne, he decided to postpone the idea until he had developed his current work further. He was constantly endeavouring to open up wider fields of investigation during this period, and the ever-present tightrope along which he was attempting to balance lay between the external, observable reality of the landscape and a deeper grasp of its metaphorical possibilities. As he said:

> People go on about Australian painters and the landscape, but really it is more than landscape, it is soul. It's not just trees. I mean the dam is a good expression of it. A dam could be like a dark mirror - it's got a whole kind of metaphorical run-off - reflecting the sky. When you're painting you do come into contact with something that is a bigger reality than you are looking at.

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[277] *Australian*, 15 January 1970.

Olsen was fascinated by the dams at Dunmoochin and painted a number of versions of this subject in the course of his stay there, culminating in 1970 in *Two Eyes of the Landscape* (pl.65). In this dramatic work he creates the impression of being at one and the same time a part of the landscape, looking onto a steep hill and looking down on the dams from an aerial perspective. Despite the quite unique appearance of this work, philosophically, the linking thread with the past which Olsen continued to apply was the concept derived from T.S. Eliot: 'I am in the landscape and the landscape is in me'. Here, the land and dams are personified in a rather surreal way, which Olsen explains as follows:

> There were 2 dams, and passing there one day the sun (it was midday) was shining on both of them - it gave me the feeling of being watched - very strange indeed.
>
> I have oriented the space of the picture so that the landscape is all around me to emphasise the feeling of being watched - which I think intensifies the animism of the landscape - all the trees, birds, figures have an individual life - a force about them - it is as though...one is revitalised by these energies as they vibrate and interact against each other.[278]

The Dunmoochin dams and the landscape in general had been a source of inspiration for a number of Australian artists who had visited the place since the 1950s. In March 1970, John Olsen decided to mount an exhibition of these artists' works to raise money for the one-teacher school at nearby Arthurs Creek which his two children were attending. He put considerable time into bringing a strong group of works together by Arthur Boyd, Albert Tucker, John Perceval and Fred Williams among others. The exhibition drew a large crowd from Melbourne and raised enough money to allow the school to buy badly needed equipment and a television set. Olsen wrote in his journal: 'It was the best opening I have attended. In the Mechanics Institute of 1887, a green weatherboard building, we erected screens and you could look at the landscape and peer at the pictures at the same time...Stephen Dattner opened the show'.

The journal John Olsen kept at Dunmoochin reveals that he often found it quite difficult to establish a working routine, partly due to his domestic responsibilities and social gatherings. He acknowledged an ongoing tension between his own gregarious personality, which led to excess, and his need for solitude in his work. Quoting Rilke, he noted: 'The necessary thing after all is but this: solitude, great

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[278] Letter from John Olsen to Stuart Purves, 2 July 1990. This was written in a request for information about the work *Two Eyes of the Dam.*

inner solitude. Going into oneself and for hours meeting no one - this one must be able to attain'.

At the same time, he began to resume his interest in Oriental philosophy. He was attracted to meditation and made an assiduous study of the I Ching. One work which reflected these concerns was *Lake Hindmarsh, the Wimmera* (pl.66). This image of great purity and simplicity, is clearly a precursor of later works such as *Lake Eyre* (pl.82). Here, the paint applied in thin, delicate washes, in places approximates the translucency of watercolours. The shape of the lake, seen from an aerial perspective, also corresponds with the yin and yang sign. Within its vast, open space is the reflection of the sun and the most minute bird: 'The reason the bird is tiny', Olsen said, 'is that you are tiny in the overwhelming sense of nature and life'. He was inspired by the Japanese Sung dynasty artists whose ideas he had first encountered in his reading of D.T. Suzuki's *Zen and Japanese Culture* in the late 1950s. In this text, Suzuki relates the ideas of Bayen (Ma Yuan 1175 – 1225), one of the greatest southern Sung artists:

> A simple fishing boat in the midst of the rippling waters is enough to awaken in the mind of the beholder a sense of the vastness of the sea and at the same time of peace and contentment - the Zen sense of the Alone...the incomprehensibility of the Absolute encompassing all the world.[279]

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COLLABORATIVE WORKS: CERAMICS AND TAPESTRIES

Since its inception, Dunmoochin had been a favoured location for many potters and weavers who wanted to live and work in a rural setting. Among them was the potter, Robert Mair, who had arrived in Dunmoochin around the same time as Olsen, and during the ensuing period they collaborated on a wide range of ceramic pieces. John Olsen was stimulated by the possibilities that working in this medium opened up for him, and the ceramic pieces he decorated with Mair and independently with Tom Sanders (both at this time and in the 1980s) amount to a considerable body of work.

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[279] D.T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Bollingen Foundation, New York and Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1973, p.22.

Robert Mair, who had come to Australia from New Zealand two years previously, had recently completed an apprenticeship at Mittagong with Les Blakeborough and the Japanese potter, Shige Shigeo.[280] Mair recalls feeling an instant rapport with Olsen who, as he put it, 'opened my eyes to the Australian landscape'. He, in turn, shared with Olsen his collection of books on Japanese ceramics. Although the fluid, calligraphic use of the brush in the Oriental designs was an inspiration to John Olsen, the end results of his own decorations had quite a distinctive appearance. Mair recalls that Olsen's approach was quite unconventional and spontaneous, which resulted in some remarkable work, but also occasionally led to difficulties:

> Sometimes he would get carried away, which didn't always suit the 'kiln gods'. There were times when the results after firing were disappointing, but in other instances we would open the kiln and discover our works with great excitement.[281]

Olsen was conscious of the difficulties of adapting to a new medium and noted in his journal: 'I will allow the medium to speak on its own much more. I have found the glazes very unpredictable – so one has to enter into the spirit of chance'. Among the most successful works were several tall vessels, storage jars and platters (pls.67 and 68) in which the striking forms conceived by Mair and Olsen's inventive designs complement one another admirably.

To begin with, they experimented on a few small pieces, but the real catalyst for their early work together came through a rather extraordinary commission from a private collector named Terry Whelan. Whelan had visited Dunmoochin with Stuart Purves from Australian Galleries in 1969 and a little later approached Olsen and Mair to undertake a dinner service for him.[282] What began as a seemingly straightforward commission became something of an obsession for them, as it continued to grow over a period of two years. The final result was a dinner setting for sixteen comprised of some one hundred and sixty pieces. It included a wide selection of plates, individual casseroles, wine jugs and goblets, serving dishes, coffee pots, tea pots, a candelabra, *et al.*

Prior to commencing this magnum opus, Olsen spent some time getting to know the collector and came up with a highly personalised design. In terms of its overall conception, he wanted to give it, 'something of a Grecian and Mediterranean feeling

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280 Robert Mair, telephone conversation with the author, March 1991.
281 ibid.
282 Terry Whelan, interview with the author.

because of Terry's love of that part of the world'. This was applied in the blue and white glazes, the notations on the wine jugs and a range of sun shapes. He also inventively included the initials 'TW' in the curvilinear designs on the plates, and allowed the 'W' on the wine goblets to follow the shape of the objects. Other distinctive motifs included the treble clef for Whelan's love of opera, and the Irish clover which referred to his Irish ancestry and annual St Patrick's day parties (at which the dinner service continues to be used today).[283]

During 1970 John Olsen also worked with the ceramic artist, Tom Sanders, who had already established a reputation in Australia and had worked with a number of other artists. His interest in pottery originated from the Boyds: 'We all of our generation stemmed from Merric Boyd'.[284] Although he had been trained at East Sydney Technical College, he felt that his real technical skills as a ceramicist were self-taught. On the process of working with other artists, Sanders commented:

> All of the artists who came and worked with me worked to my technique. In a sense I supplied them with a blank canvas, but you are also controlled by the medium. What I said was, 'This is *how* it is done, but *what* you do is yours'.[285]

Olsen and Sanders collaborated on a range of domestic ware, including plates and bowls such as *The Potters Craft* which was characteristic of a number of Sanders's works around this period. Whereas the decorations which Olsen had done with Robert Mair were painted on with the brush, with Sanders he used the 'scraffito' technique, incising the drawing of the potter at the wheel into the glossy white and green glaze.

Their major collaborative work of the period was the large ceramic mural, *Eastern World*, eventually installed at the University of Melbourne (pl.69). John Olsen made several references to progress on the design in his journal. On 1 March 1970 he wrote: 'I had a very good morning working on the mural, which I think is coming on well after a long period of dissatisfaction...I glazed and scumbled over it and it's amazing how rich it all became'. It is an unusual, technically rich ceramic which, in its thick, black encircling lines and vivid colour is reminiscent of some of the works by the Spanish artist, Joan Miro.

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283 ibid.

284 Tom Sanders, interview with the author, May 1990. Merric Boyd (1888-1959), father of Arthur and David Boyd, who established Murrumbeena pottery in Victoria, is regarded as one of Australia's finest ceramicists and was an inspirational force for many of the younger generation.

285 Tom Sanders, interview with the author.

From 1969 and into the 1970s, John Olsen had also been working on a number of tapestry designs with two weavers Bruce Arthur and Deanna Conti, who were living on Timana Island in Queensland. Olsen recalls that he first met them at the Rudy Komon Gallery in Sydney and subsequently made visits to Timana Island with Clifton Pugh. Tapestries such as *Eastern World, Western World* and *Sun Over Capricornia* are very different in character to his earlier tapestries. In contrast to the refined elegance of the works woven in Portugal, *Western World* (pl.70) is clearly more exuberant in its densely textured surfaces. The Arthurs often threaded quite thick skeins of wool into and over the surface, on occasion even including strands of twigs and other natural materials.

This approach allowed Olsen the freedom to improvise. Some of the designs, such as *Eastern World* and *Western World* are quite abstract and heraldic, while others, such as *Sun Over Capricornia*, are reminiscent of his sea-sun images of the mid 1960s and also relate to the marine life and atmosphere of a north Queensland tropical island.

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In the course of 1970, John and Valerie Olsen were considering moving back to Sydney.[286] In July of that year, the artist and critic, Wallace Thornton, took them to see a block of land in Dural, an excursion Olsen recorded in his journal: 'go with Wallace to see some superb land...a creek running through the bottom - beautiful trees and rocky outcrops'. However, a few days later he wrote: 'We arrive back in Dunmoochin and rest in its...peace and creative silences, what a haven it is'. He also noted, 'I like Melbourne and its people very much and if we leave I will feel rather sad'.

However, by the end of 1970, they decided to purchase the land at Dural and to build a house there. During their stay at Dunmoochin, they had been renting their house at Watsons Bay, and they returned there early in 1971. The following few years alternated between periods living at Watsons Bay and camping on the property at Dural as the house was gradually built. Valerie Olsen recalls:

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[286] In an interveiw with the author, Valerie Olsen recalled: 'We were sitting outside the pub at Dunmoochin and John looked out on the landscape and asked me, "Do you want to live on this land?" I replied: "I love this countryside but it doesn't somehow feel quite right. I feel the call of waratahs". I was attracted to the bush around Sydney'.

> We were trying to build the house and our architect went off to Africa. The house at Dural grew like topsy. Robert Mair came up and they managed to resurrect it. The idea of the plan was to integrate the house with the bush.[287]

The constant moving was not altogether easy on Olsen's children, Tim and Louise. Tim Olsen, who was then ten years of age, recalls that after spending two years at a one-teacher school, he had a lot of catching up to do to keep up with his Sydney counterparts.[288] Nevertheless, they both remember their parents' ongoing concern for their welfare and found that continual exposure to new ideas and environments gave them an education apart from their schooling.[289]

While they were camping on the land and plans for the house were unfolding, John Olsen painted *You Beaut Country, Hawkesbury Dapple* (pl.71).The palette of creamy, golden-yellows and ochres is reminiscent of his earlier *You Beaut Country* series, but here he was clearly looking more closely at the landscape and plant forms themselves. Hints of the irrational are still evident, although much more subtly disguised in the small faces and odd creatures which can be detected amidst the animistic shapes and in the spindly birds legs dangling from the edge in the upper right. Spatially, there is an obvious continuation from the Dunmoochin landscapes, although here Olsen appears to magnify the circular paths of curling forms and shapes that approximate fern fronds and seed pods.

Apart from this work, Olsen painted very few successful images based on the Dural landscape. Late in the decade he worked on a small suite of etchings, *Spring in the Valley*, 1978, which celebrated the unique flora and fauna of the area, but his significant works of the period were inspired by other sources. He found living within the dense bush too claustrophobic and preferred more open, panoramic vistas. Whereas, prior to this, the environments in which he lived had played a major informative role in his work, in the 1970s there were two broad, shaping factors: his journeys into the Australian interior on the 'Wild Australia' film series and visits to Lake Eyre, and the renewed impact of Sydney Harbour.

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287 Valerie Olsen, interview with the author.
288 Tim Olsen, interview with the author.
289 Tim and Louise Olsen in discussions with the author.

fig.41 *Albert Tucker* 1973, lithograph on Arches paper, ed.10, 76 x 57cm, published by Rudy Komon Gallery

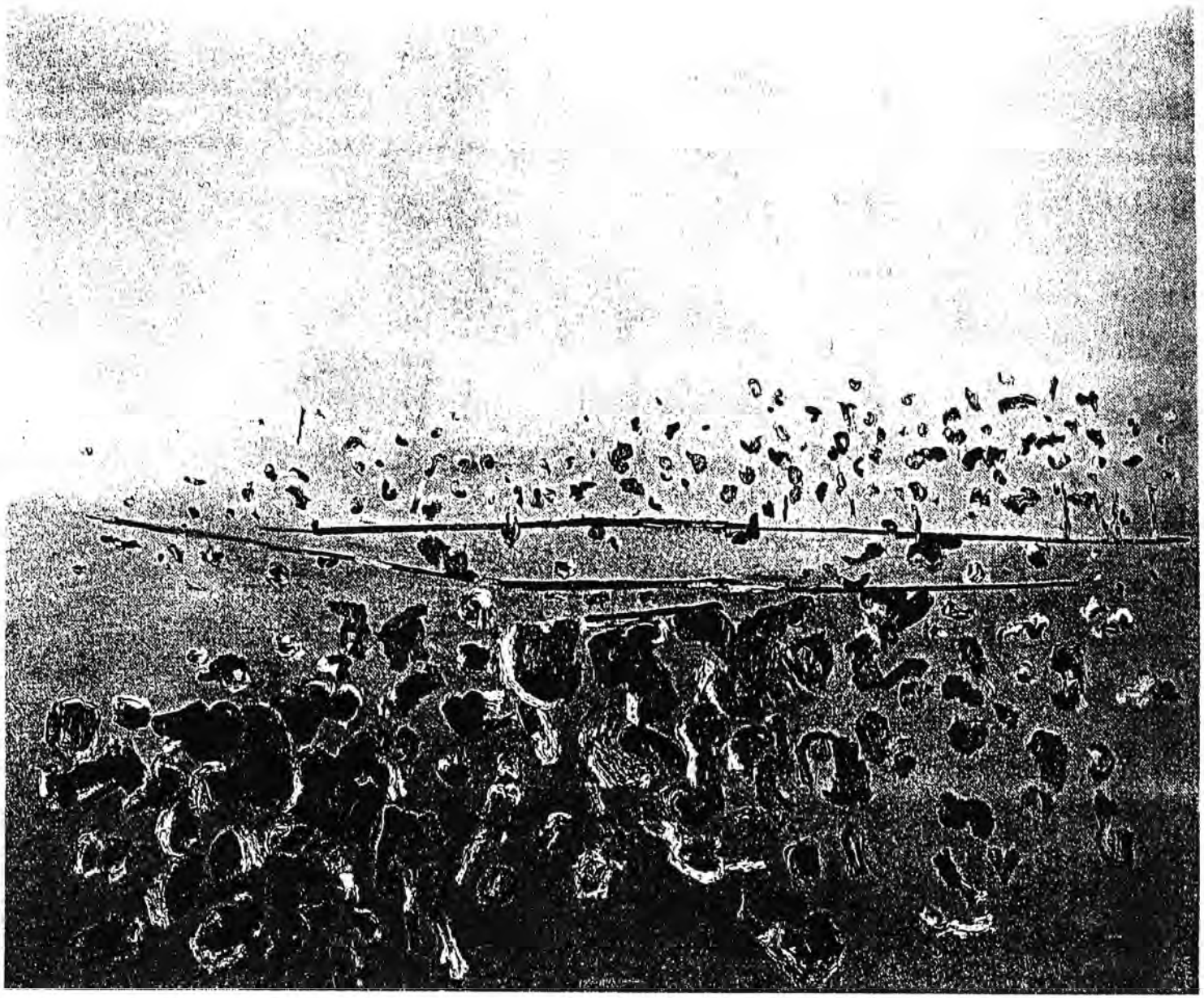
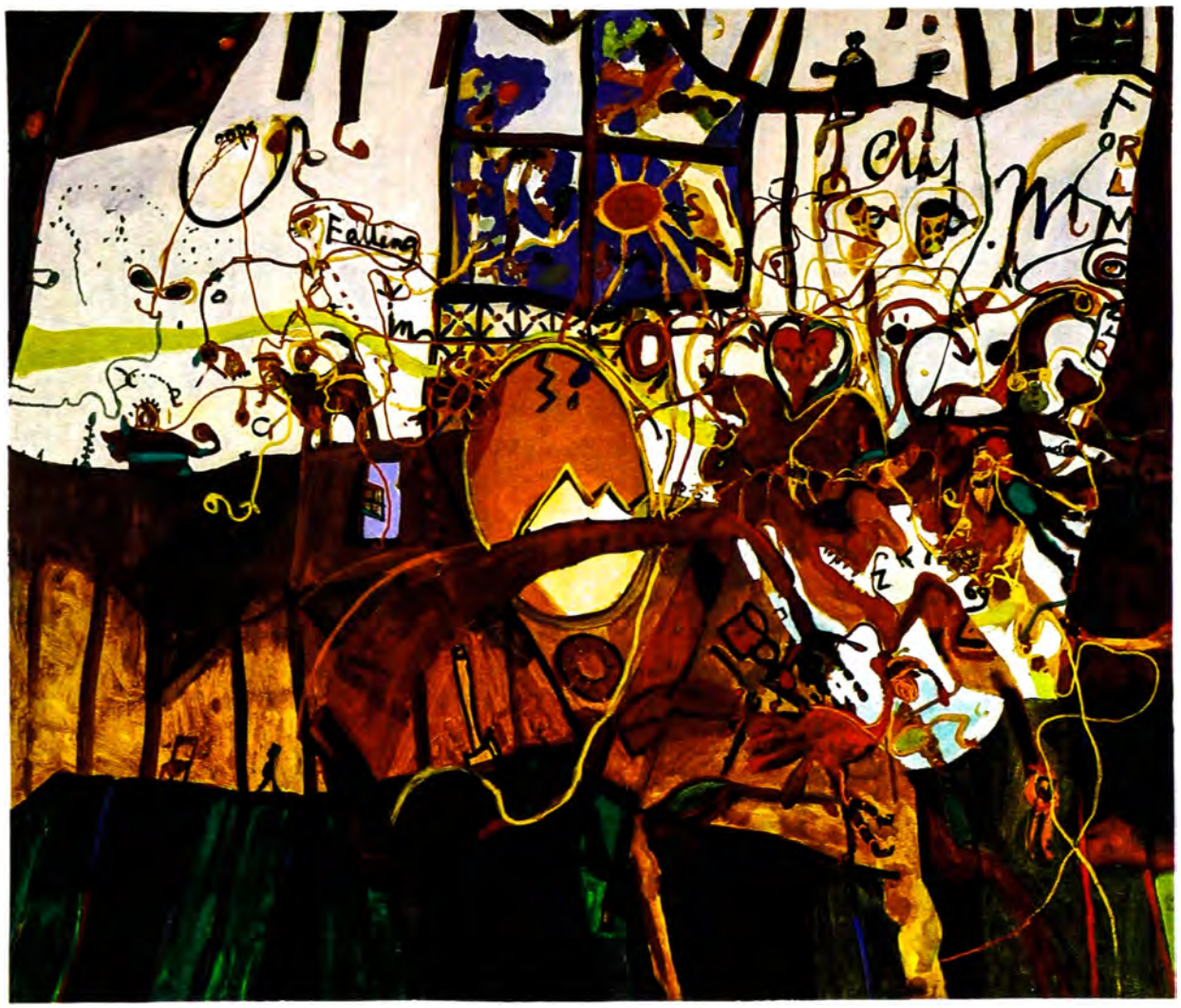


fig.42 Fred Williams, *Silver and grey* 1969-70, oil on canvas, 152.5 x 183.5cm. Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra



pl.58 *Love in the Kitchen* 1969 (also known as *Love and the Kitchen*), oil on cavas, 199 x 213.4cm
Collection of the artist

pl.59 *Pied Beauty* 1969, oil on composition board, 121.8 x 134cm
Art Gallery of South Australia

pl.60 *Wattle and moon* 1969, oil on canvas, 122 x 151.5cm
Private collection

pl.61 *Clouds and the Earth* 1969,
gouache on paper, 48.5 x 68cm
Private collection, London

pl.62 *Jeparit* 1969, oil on board, 119 x 139.2cm
Private collection

pl.63 *Mallee Country* 1969, oil on canvas, 156 x 140.5cm
Private collection

pl.64 *The Chasing Bird Landscape* 1969, oil on canvas, 166 x 209cm. Collection: Westpac Banking Corporation

pl.65 *Two Eyes of the Landscape* 1970, oil on canvas, 215 x 153cm
Private collection, USA

pl.66 *Lake Hindmarsh, the Wimmera* 1970, oil on canvas, 171 x 186cm
Private collection

pl.67 Selected pieces from ceramic dinner service 1969-70
by John Olsen and Robert Mair,
Collection: Terry Whelan

pl.68 Selected ceramics 1982 by John Olsen and Robert Mair
(back cover of catalogue for *John Olsen* exhibition,
Australian Galleries, Melbourne, 1982)

pl.69 *Eastern World* 1969-71, ceramic mural *in situ*, 5.95 x 14.75m.
John Olsen and Tom Sanders
The University of Melbourne Art Gallery Collection

pl.70 *Western World* 1969-70, tapestry, 150 x 204cm
Designed by John Olsen, woven by Bruce Arthur and Deanna Conti,
BHP Art Collection

pl.71 *You Beaut Country, Hawkesbury Dapple* 1971-72, oil on cavas, 214 x 167cm. Private Collection

CHAPTER 8

SALUTE TO FIVE BELLS - THE SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE MURAL

Time that is moved by little fidget wheels
Is not my Time, the flood that does not flow.
Between the double and the single bell
Of a ship's hour, between a round of bells
From the dark warship riding there below,
I have lived many lives, and this one life
Of Joe, long dead, who lives between five bells.

Deep and dissolving verticals of light
Ferry the falls of moonshine down. Five bells
Coldly rung out in a machine's voice. Night and water
Pour to one rip of darkness, the Harbour floats
In air, the Cross hangs upside-down in water.

Extract from Kenneth Slessor's poem, *Five Bells*[290]

The sea is like the earth breathing

John Olsen[291]

> Artist John Olsen was commissioned today to paint a huge mural for the Opera House. His selection was made by the William Dobell Art Foundation. The mural, 70ft x 10ft, is the first work to be commissioned by the foundation, which was set up to benefit and promote art. It will cost about $35,000. Before his death in 1970, Sir William Dobell was enthusiastic about the Opera House...[Olsen] has done a tentative series of sketches for the mural which will be called Salute to Five Bells.

This announcement, released to the media on 28 August 1972, signified the most immense single project of John Olsen's artistic career to date. It was not only the huge scale of the work, but also the extraordinary nature of the building as a whole and the publicity surrounding it, that made this an awesome responsibility from the outset. That Olsen's mural was ultimately felt to be controversial by some when it was finished was, in a sense, following in the wake of this magnificent building

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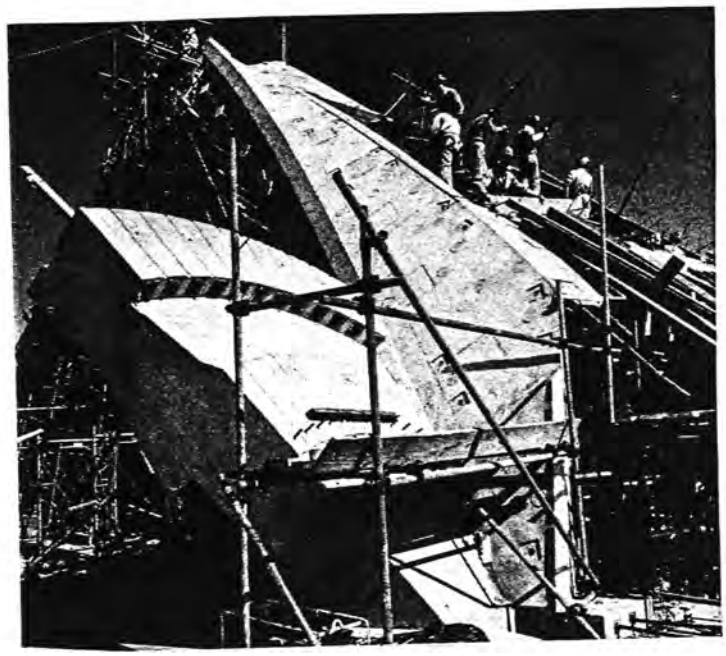
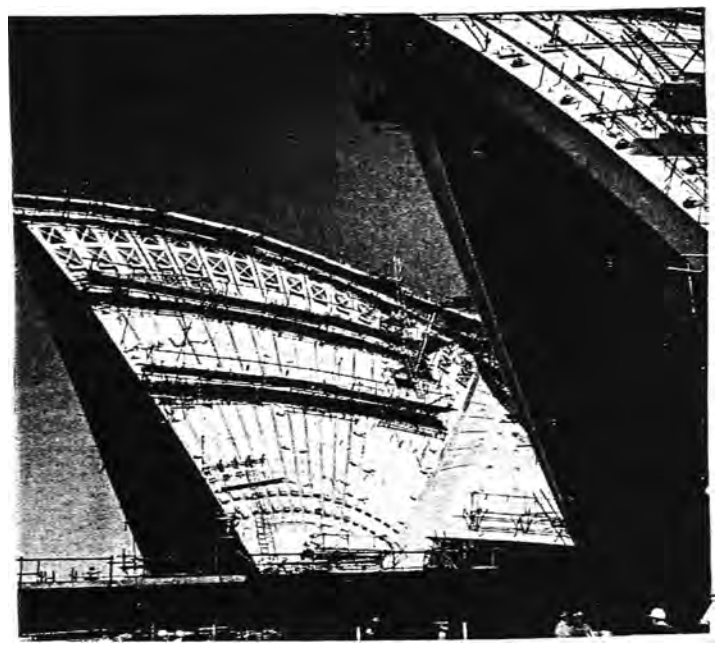
290 Quoted in John Olsen, *Salute to Five Bells*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1973, unpaginated.
291 John Olsen, *Salute to Five Bells*, ibid.



Construction work on the Sydney Opera House
photographed by David Beale for *Walkabout* magazine, April 1966, Vol.32, No.4



itself, which had been the subject of much greater controversy over the past sixteen years.

The idea for the building was conceived prior to John Olsen's first solo exhibition when, in 1954, the New South Wales Labor government, under J.J. Cahill, decided to build a music centre on the site of a disused tram depot at Bennelong Point on Sydney Harbour. Three years later an international competition for the design of an opera house was won by the Danish architect, Jorn Utzon. Selected out of two hundred and twenty-two entries, his design was described as revolutionary and controversial; breaking all the rules of the competition.[292] The architect, Harry Seidler, who had also entered the competition, graciously commended the judges daring decision:

> Architecture is a language and architects speak it. Most of them just barely manage to speak – very few ever speak eloquent prose, but it happens very rarely indeed that any of them create poetry with just a few words. Our proposed opera house is just such poetry, spoken with an exquisite economy of words.[293]

In March 1957, Carl Hammerschmidt wrote in *Meanjin*:

> Some have compared the external appearance of the Opera House with an armadillo in concrete, a scaly dinosaur and a prehistoric pterodactyl. Those critics are probably not aware of how pertinent their comparisons are if considered from another angle...Early this century Wolfflin's emotional theories of dynamic, contrast, tension, were studied. In other periods it was the relationship of forms in nature that inspired the designer: plans, crystals, rock formations, the structure of leaves...Groups of Scandinavian architects have, in our time, been working on similar problems...Jorn Utzon worked for some time with [them]...and his buildings, projects and writings make it clear that nature is his source of inspiration.[294]

It was precisely this sense of the power of associations and Utzon's affinity with nature that Olsen related to: 'socketing of shells reminds me of birds' wings primary and secondary feathers'.[295] He was also impressed by the way in which the architectural forms were imaginatively integrated with the site; 'the overlapping shells reflecting the movement of tides and sailing ships'. Although Olsen's *Salute*

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[292] Michael Baum, *The Sydney Opera House Affair*, Thomas Nelson, Melbourne, 1967.
[293] Geoffrey Dutton, *The Innovators*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1986, p.213, quoted from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 February 1957.
[294] *Meanjin*, March 1957.
[295] John Olsen, *Salute to Five Bells*, op.cit., unpaginated.

to Five Bells was much more formal, reductive and pre-planned than anything he had previously attempted, he was continually developing metaphors and similes with the harbour and its marine life in the iconography of the work and its spatial relationship to the location.

The building of the Opera House was an administrative quagmire with large cost escalations, time delays and other logistical difficulties. Although Utzon had conceived of the exterior shells and the interior as 'two worlds...created out of the same organism',[296] he was unable to see this fulfilled. After the Cahill government was defeated in 1965, Utzon ran into a headlong confrontation with Davis Hughes, the new Minister for Public Works, and ten months later he resigned. This action was widely felt to have been forced upon him and was followed by a wave of protests from artists, writers, architects and a broad spectrum of the general public. John Olsen was one who felt that 'an awful mistake was made in sacking Utzon'. He acknowledged the high cost and time expenditure but, as he wrote in his *Salute to Five Bells* journal in 1972, '...as the sun sinks in the west we know you cannot equate time with money – some of the Gothic cathedrals took 200 years to build'.

By the time Olsen's commission to paint the mural for the Opera House was made public in 1972, preparations for the work were already well under way. The idea had initially been proposed by James Gleeson in December 1971. The feasibility of undertaking a work on such a large scale was the result of a bequest left by the artist, William Dobell, 'to benefit, promote and encourage art in New South Wales'. It was the role of the trustees of the foundation to evolve a policy for the bequest, as Gleeson (a trustee) explained:

> Unlike the founder of the Archibald Prize, Dobell laid down no hard and fast rules or requirements, so the foundation enjoys an enviable flexibility which allows it to adjust to changing needs and conditions...
>
> The trustees were motivated in this decision by the knowledge that many important artists reach maturity without having the opportunity to channel their skill and experience into a really major work of art.[297]

It was appropriate that John Olsen, who had made a considerable contribution to the artistic life of Sydney during the previous two decades, should have been chosen for

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296 *Meanjin*, March 1957.
297 *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 3 September 1972.

this commission. Since the 1950s, and particularly during the early to mid-1960s, his passion for the harbour and the city had been revealed in image after image – *Up and Down the Seaport, Entrance to the Seaport of Desire, Entrance to the Siren City of the Rat Race* and *Childhood by the Seaport.* As Daniel Thomas wrote: '[M]ore than any other artist he has articulated the belief that his style owes something to Sydney itself, its topography of peninsulas, harbours and hills, its heat and dampness, its hedonism and savagery'.[298]

It was also fitting that John Olsen chose as his theme the poem *Five Bells*, by the Australian poet, Kenneth Slessor (1901 – 1971) who similarly found the harbour an immense source of fascination. Slessor expressed this empathy in a radio interview in 1962: 'I haven't gone to sea, but I've lived next to the water all my life and I shall always have Sydney Harbour fixed in my skull'.[299] Olsen wanted to pay tribute both to a 'great poem' and to the poet himself. Poetry had long been important to Olsen and he felt that poets should be represented in this great building.

Olsen had admired Slessor's *Five Bells* since the early 1960s and used the title in two important paintings of the period – *Five Bells*, 1963 (pl.48), and *The Sea Sun and Five Bells*, 1964 (pl.49). In these earlier works, the links with the poem were much more tenuous than in the mural. They were based on a feeling of shared affection for the harbour which continued in *Salute to Five Bells*, but were essentially full of youthful vigour and ebullience, removed from the central elegiac mood of the poem which provided the springboard for the mural. This was quieter than any harbour painting he had made before, 'superbly still, as hushed and as wide...as night water reaching from horizon to horizon'.[300]

The poem *Five Bells*, written in 1939, was the summation of many of the ideas and thematic concerns that had preoccupied Kenneth Slessor throughout his writing life and it is widely regarded as his most impressive work. It centres around the drowning of his friend, Joe Lynch, a 'black-and-white' artist with whom he worked in the 1920s on *Smith's Weekly* and *Melbourne Punch.* Of the circumstances of Lynch's death, he wrote:

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298 Daniel Thomas, 'Sydney Opera House: The Works of Art', *Art and Australia*, vol.11, no.3, 1974, p.263.
299 Herbert C. Jaffa, *Kenneth Slessor,* New York University and Twayne Publishers, New York, 1971.
300 *Salute to Five Bells*, op.cit., see introduction by Laurie Thomas.

> One evening in the 1930s, Joe and half a dozen other artists and journalists left Circular Quay by ferry to go to a party on the north side of the Harbour. Joe sat on the lower deck rail of the boat, clad in an ancient tattered raincoat, heavily laden with bottled beer in the pockets. There was a good deal of jollity until someone noticed that Joe had disappeared.
>
> The ferry hove to and there was a wide search, but no trace of Joe could be found. His body was never recovered and eventually he was presumed drowned.[301]

John Olsen did not attempt to realistically describe the narrative of the poem, but rather wanted to convey the underlying atmosphere through colour, symbolic form and spatial considerations. His interest centred on the taut residual quality of the first two verses of the poem and the final section. He felt that it was too 'long in the centre and in other parts lacks concentration', but saw its strength in the beautiful lyricism.

To begin with, Olsen explored the subject as widely as possible, working on a number of tentative, preparatory sketches in his Watsons Bay studio. He had resumed his early morning swims at Camp Cove and often gathered visual information on his walks along the beach. During the early stages of the documentary film being prepared on the mural,[302] we find Olsen drawing the flowing tentacles of a squid that had been given to him by the restaurateur, Peter Doyle. He comments:

> I think about the squid tentacles clasping, holding, sinking...a beaut relationship with Slessor's elegy: the man is slowly sinking, he's drowning, his body was never found...one uses these emotional similes and metaphors. It's the mystery of things that fascinate.[303]

The site for the mural was the sweeping curved wall in the main foyer of the concert hall, faced by a huge expanse of glass with views which stretched from the Harbour Bridge and Circular Quay on one side, to the Heads on the other. In one sense, it was 'an artist's dream', and Olsen was particularly impressed by the sense of the optical connection between interior and exterior. However, the exceedingly long expanse also provided considerable difficulties. In an interview on 4 September 1972, he said: I'm going through this tremendous strain over this thing...Just the

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301 Kenneth Slessor, 'English Project No.4', *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 31 July 1967.
302 'Not a Job for the Boys', ABC television documentary, written and narrated by the producer, Brian Adams, 1971 - 73.
303 ibid.

mechanics of how it can be done is a big enough problem. I need brushes 12 inches wide, paint not in tubes but in buckets.[304] Another problem was that it was not possible to work on the mural on site, which meant that it was difficult to assess precisely how the mural would look in its final location.

Olsen commenced the mural in a rented, cavernous warehouse in The Rocks large enough to house the eight panels required to cover the 70 foot (21.3 metre) span. He had two assistants working with him during this period, Bob King and Bill Jackson, men in their early sixties who had worked with William Dobell and other artists for many years. Olsen recalls this initial period as a relatively peaceful time of hard work and concentration, enlivened by his friendship with his two 'minders'. King and Jackson worked well with Olsen, who described the team as 'the crazy gang'. They helped in many ways, from mixing the paints to sorting out numerous practical and logistical concerns. Olsen decided initially to work on the mural on the floor. However, as the eight hardwood panels had been designed to fit into the curved wall, 'like an Oriental bridge', they could not lie flat, and special scaffolding on wheels had to be constructed to support the artist over the work. 'If Michaelangelo lay on his back for the Sistine Chapel', Olsen quipped, 'it is appropriate that an artist in the antipodes should lie on his gut'.[305]

John Olsen spent a great deal of time working with his assistants on the principal colours which would establish the mood of the mural and set the course for what was to follow. Above all, he wanted to reflect the phosphorescent, nocturnal atmosphere of *Five Bells*, which Slessor described as a meditation at night.[306] 'We were searching for some sort of elegiac look, that body-was-never-found feeling, and finally fixed on two principal colours: violet and almost the same value blue.' It was an attempt to enter into the mystery of the underwater world as well as of the colour itself; colour 'not as drawing but as a source of sensations proceeding from its own nature, from its own mysterious, enigmatic force'.[307]

In relation to the site, Olsen wanted to imaginatively and spatially create the sense of a pendulum swinging backwards and forwards from the arched bow of the mural, to the waters of the harbour outside. The long, sweeping horizontal format of the mural lent itself to creating an impression of the vast, seemingly never-ending space of the ocean. He also had to take into account the curved arch of the mural, which

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304 *Sun* (Sydney), 4 September 1972.
305 ibid.
306 Jaffa, op.cit.
307 Olsen, *Salute to Five Bells*, op.cit.

was so pronounced that it would not be possible for the viewer to see the whole until standing in front of the centre of the work.

After discussions with the interior architect, Peter Hall, he decided that the mural should be able to be read sequentially, as the viewer moved along. Olsen achieved this by working on individual motifs, often in a miniaturist manner, and linked the parts to the whole by long, airy, tentacle-like lines which corresponded with the undulating tides and the wandering inflections of thought.

Although, on one level, the mural could be viewed sequentially, Olsen also wanted to create a sense of being submerged in its secret depths while simultaneously flying over the harbour bays and inlets. After applying the underground of violet blue, he began to lay in the large, precise forms such as the hull of a boat, the buoys, a large anchor and the curvilinear forms of the inlets. When the work was placed upright in The Rocks studio, he applied the more minute details: scattered fragments like the internal parts of a clock, the little bright-yellow crescent moon shedding its light, and the dots of the ferry lights on the water at night.

Many of the images were abstracted and ideographic, allowing for multiple associations, as he noted:

> so called 'abstract art' is the true art of the 20th-century, in my case it allows me to look at nature in multiple levels - the attempt to fuse many images into (a) single concrete image...
>
> IT ALLOWS ONE TO INCREASE THE DIMENSION OF NATURE'S METAPHORS.[308]

He added: 'I don't think purely abstract art has any significance whatsoever. An artist must believe he is painting reality'. The application of these ideas bears comparison with the Spanish painter, Joan Miro, who also employed an astonishing array of cryptic, shorthand signs such as curlicues and crescent shapes, derived from the natural world. The magnification of particular incidents also related to Olsen's interest in looking at things under a microscope which was developing as a result of his initial association with natural scientists on the 'Wild Australia' film series.[309]

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[308] ibid.

[309] Olsen worked with Ken Taylor on the 'Wild Australia' film series for the Australian Broadcasting Commission at intervals during the course of 1971 - 73. See Chapter 9.

In some instances, the fusion of multiple images related directly to aspects of Slessor's poem, as in his reference to the drowning man, Joe Lynch, symbolised by a head attached to an abstracted squid and a long, iridescent green fish, thereby becoming part of the elements. In the centre of the mural is a large, circular, emerald-green shape from which delicate, mechanistic arms and fantastic shapes (like a Calder sculpture) emerge. In his journal Olsen reduces visual phenomena to pared-back, simplified diagrams, such as a circle with little protruding lines that might start off as a sea urchin with tentacles and become the waving arms of a drowning man.

The sense of detachment in the distinctly drawn, mechanistic shapes, which are in turn suspended in the enigmatic expanse of aqueous blue, parallels one of the major themes in Kenneth Slessor's poem: the calculated precision of measured time – 'Five bells/ Coldly rung out in a machine's voice' – set against the less tangible, evanescent atmosphere of the harbour - 'the Harbour floats/ In air, the Cross hangs upside-down in water'.[310]

Many of the bolder forms and vivid colours were added after the eight panels had been transported (in two pantechnicon trucks) to the Opera House. Prior to this point, John Olsen had generally felt optimistic about the progress being made. In a sequence of the documentary film made early in 1973, appearing in a black and gold lamé jacket, he was at the peak of confidence, as he later said, 'like Machiavelli himself'. However, elation turned to despair when the mural was located in situ in the concert hall foyer. The physical scale of the foyer and the light flooding in from the massive expanse of glass 'washed the mural away'. Olsen had to rethink large areas of the work. In April 1973 he noted in his journal:

> I've had to belt Christ out of that bloody mural...I've had to be defiant [–] rotten aloof beast it is – I've had to show [who's] boss. After, perhaps, we'll make up & like each other – I have to remind myself constantly forget its in this great building - Jump into it – be it – wrestle, caress, torture – be jealous with it.

Olsen wanted to strengthen the whole, to regain a sense of the baroque, without losing the primary elegiac mood. Gradually he made progress, heightening the colour – adding the luminous reds and greens – and many of the bolder forms. But at a time when he needed quiet concentration, this soon became impossible because of the intrusions by the workmen on the site:

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[310] Olsen, *Salute to Five Bells*, op.cit.

> We have had good days working – but its been quite hideous with the heckling from workmen – its been really rough – there we are quietly working, that miraculous silence of a brush moving and suddenly I am aware of someone standing beside me – 'Hey sport whats this about' one character kept yelling out – 'You'll be sued for this' and of course that weary one 'My child of 4 could do better' – 'good I know the dealer who will handle him'...
>
> How strange it is that modern Art has been going for 100 years - with a vast ocean of books and publicity about it - and still the public [is] as confused as ever...the mural is still not finished - that doesn't deter them in the slightest...
>
> They have bugged me so much at the end of the session - through their heckling, jeering and laughing, [that] I am physically trembling. I'll have to give up for a few days to keep the psychic drive.[311]

These problems were compounded over the subsequent days when the mural was defaced. Respite arrived with the Easter holidays, when he was able to work with his assistants in relative isolation. During this period he felt that he once again had it in his grasp: 'the mural is seeming smaller & smaller & I have it all in my mind...' On Easter Saturday he wrote: 'We have done it! thank the Lord that's it - Pack up the paints...put the brushes in the box...- it said its finished...70' x 10' you have to be a lunatic...'[312]

Prior to the official opening of the Opera House in October 1973, many hundreds of people saw John Olsen's mural. The reactions of the critics were mixed. Some felt that the mural showed great courage and was a tribute to his integrity as an artist, while others were disappointed in the fact that it deviated from his characteristic rumbustiousness. One critic went as far as to say that Olsen's talent had drowned with Joe Lynch,[313] and letters were sent to newspapers complaining about the cost of the mural and contemporary art in general. Olsen was depressed by the criticism and later said, 'I should have done a sort of classical frieze with a lot of Greek figures and pleased everyone'.[314]

Conversely, the view was also expressed that the mural was Olsen's greatest work.[315] Realistically however, it needs to be understood in relation to the nature of

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311 ibid.
312 ibid.
313 Elizabeth Young, *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 28 July 1973.
314 Transcript of John Olsen's Perth Festival lecture, Art Gallery of Western Australia, 16 February 1978.
315 James Gleeson, *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 22 July 1973.

the particular commission; as an effective and sensitive solution to an imposing task. In an appraisal of the art works for the Sydney Opera House, Daniel Thomas wrote that he regarded many to have been an afterthought. However, he noted that 'the one public work of art which seems to have been carefully considered is the mural painted by John Olsen...emotionally it is a very intelligent solution for the site... affirming the normal night-time for being at the Opera House'.[316]

John Olsen's *Salute to Five Bells* is a serene and meditative painting extending his own interpretation of the harbour. On one level it works as an elegant mural decoration, but it also goes beyond this in its multi-layered conception and sense of poetry. It loses some of its power when viewed in daylight and is best contemplated at dusk or at night when the work picks up on the lights punctuating the expanse of the harbour in front, and imaginatively recreates the mysterious underwater world. It is a homage to the harbour, to the poet Kenneth Slessor and to the somnambulant, elegiac mood of his poem, which concludes as follows:

I looked out of my window in the dark
At waves with diamond quills and combs of light
That arched their mackerel-backs and smacked the sand
In the moons drench, that straight enormous glaze,
And ships far off asleep, and Harbour-buoys
Tossing their fireballs wearily each to each,
And tried to hear your voice, but all I heard
Was a boat's whistle, and the scraping squeal
Of seabirds' voices far away, and bells,
Five Bells. Five bells coldly ringing out.

Five Bells.

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316 Thomas, op.cit.

FURTHER INVESTIGATIONS OF SYDNEY HARBOUR AND MARINE LIFE

In 1973 John Olsen executed a number of works relating to the Opera House mural and the theme of Sydney harbour. However, after the strain of this commission, they generally demonstrate a sense of liberation and renewed exuberance. *The ship passes by* (pl.73), painted in his small Watsons Bay studio, is clearly more baroque in its animated calligraphic line which, together with the inventive composition and ravishing colour relationships, make this one of his most technically accomplished works of the period. With regard to the significance of colour, Olsen commented:

> Colour should sing and have the vitality and impact that one colour can have against another. Real colour as opposed to tonal colour – the real colour of Persian miniatures, of the Egyptians...
>
> Colours are like the keys of an instrument, in fact it is near to music in its harmonies and its settings...There is enormous satisfaction... in playing with the push and pull of paint in its full flush of colour. 'I am ravished and consumed by colour.' Klee.[317]

During his early morning swims at Camp Cove, John Olsen had become fascinated by the steel ships and boats that frequently drifted into view: 'boats - barges trudging through the water - and their colours - bright greens, oranges [and] sullen blacks - their forms - sullen and lumpen - and the wakes they leave. [B]ig ocean liners knifing their way to the open sea - their flags - wind agushing - air of determined expectancy'.[318]

This is the mood of *Captain Dobbin*, (pl.74), which also recalls the irrational humour and juicy-fruit, chaotic energy of *Entrance to the Siren City of the Rat Race*(pl.22). Here, the head of Dobbin is attached to the long, lolly pink ship (pushed up to the top of the composition) with its funnels spouting. Below is a medley of burlesque activity: a jazzy frog with bright red lips sitting cross-legged in the centre and a crazy-looking dog in the lower-left, adjoining a yellow line, with its tongue hanging out and the letters 'LICK' above it.

The images of boats and barges also brought back memories of his early childhood and the seaport of Newcastle which filtered through into a quite different and

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317 *John Olsen's Notebook*, collected and arranged by T. J. Woodward, op.cit.
318 Olsen, *Salute to Five Bells,* op.cit.

striking work, *Newcastle Coalboat.* On one level, the simplified, monumental forms imply the cranes and boats of heavy industry; looked at another way, their inventive, symmetrical application suggests a face, like a Melanesian mask.

The marine world has provided John Olsen with a seemingly endless source of fascination and wonder throughout his life. His explorations of the minutiae of its plant and animal life in encrusted rock pools and the continual flux of the tides culminated at the end of the decade in *The Bay and Tidal Pool* (fig.45). This work, originally painted for the Master Builders Association in East Melbourne, was partly inspired by the beaches around Sorrento in Victoria. Yet specific references to place were only a starting point; the overall impression is more universal, indicating the balance between the multiple layers and enclosed arena of the tidal pool set against the big, open rhythms of the ocean. It is about fullness and emptiness, dynamism and restraint, and encompasses two of the major streams of activity and thought which preoccupied Olsen between the early and late 1970s: an intimate observation of the natural world and an ongoing interest in Oriental philosophy.

fig.43 John Olsen at work on large preparatory drawings for the Opera House mural, *Salute to Five Bells*.

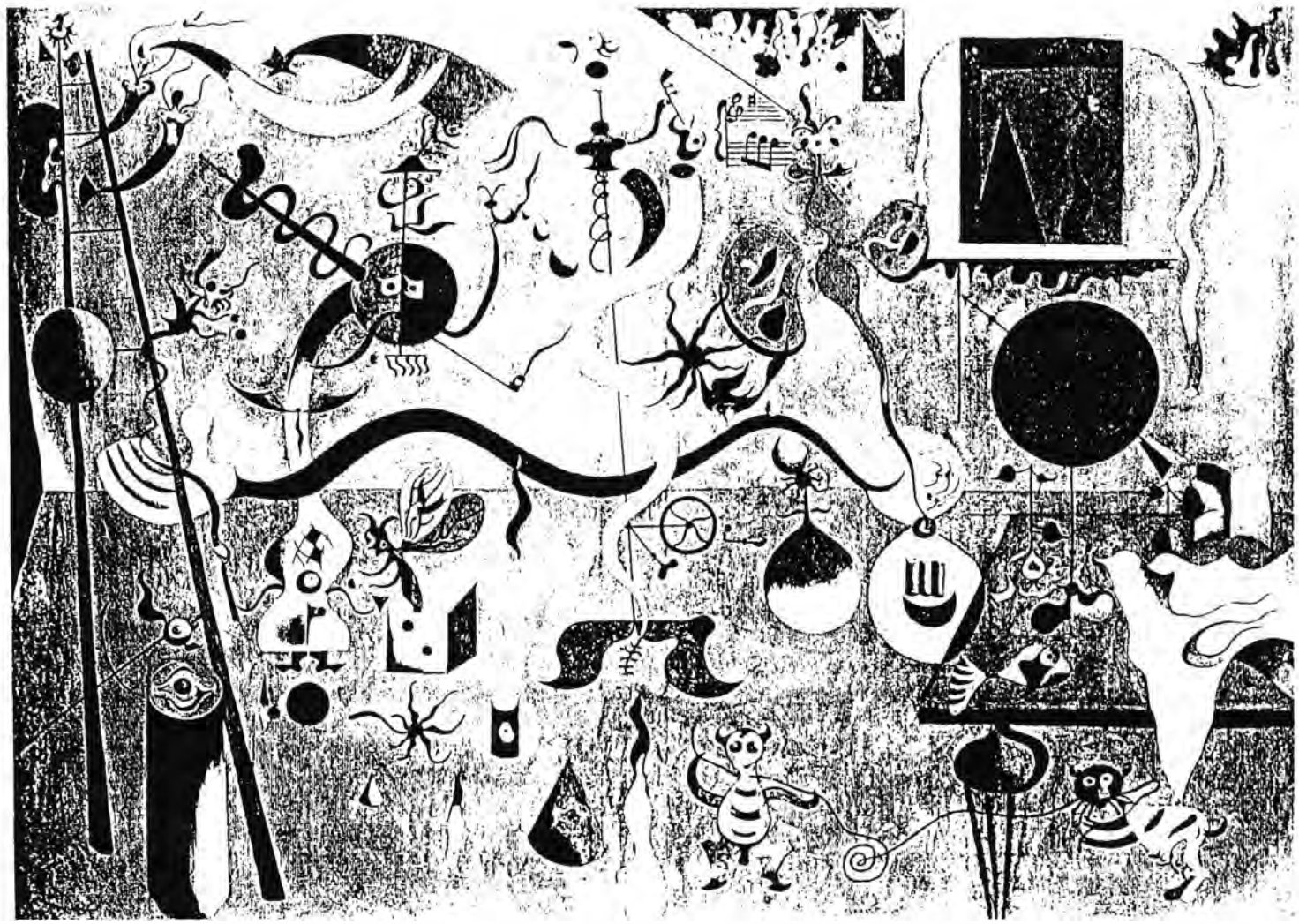


fig.44 Joan Miro, *The Harlequin's Carnival* 1924-25, oil on canvas, 66 x 92.5cm. Collection: The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York

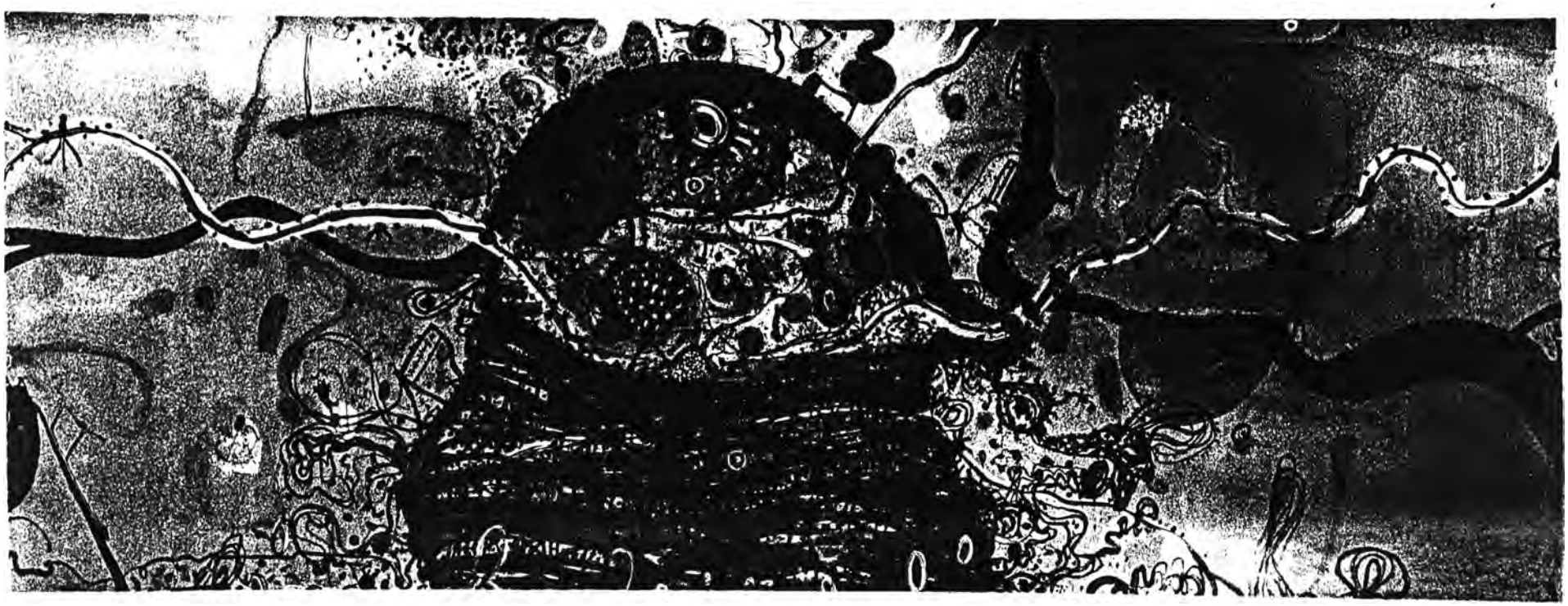
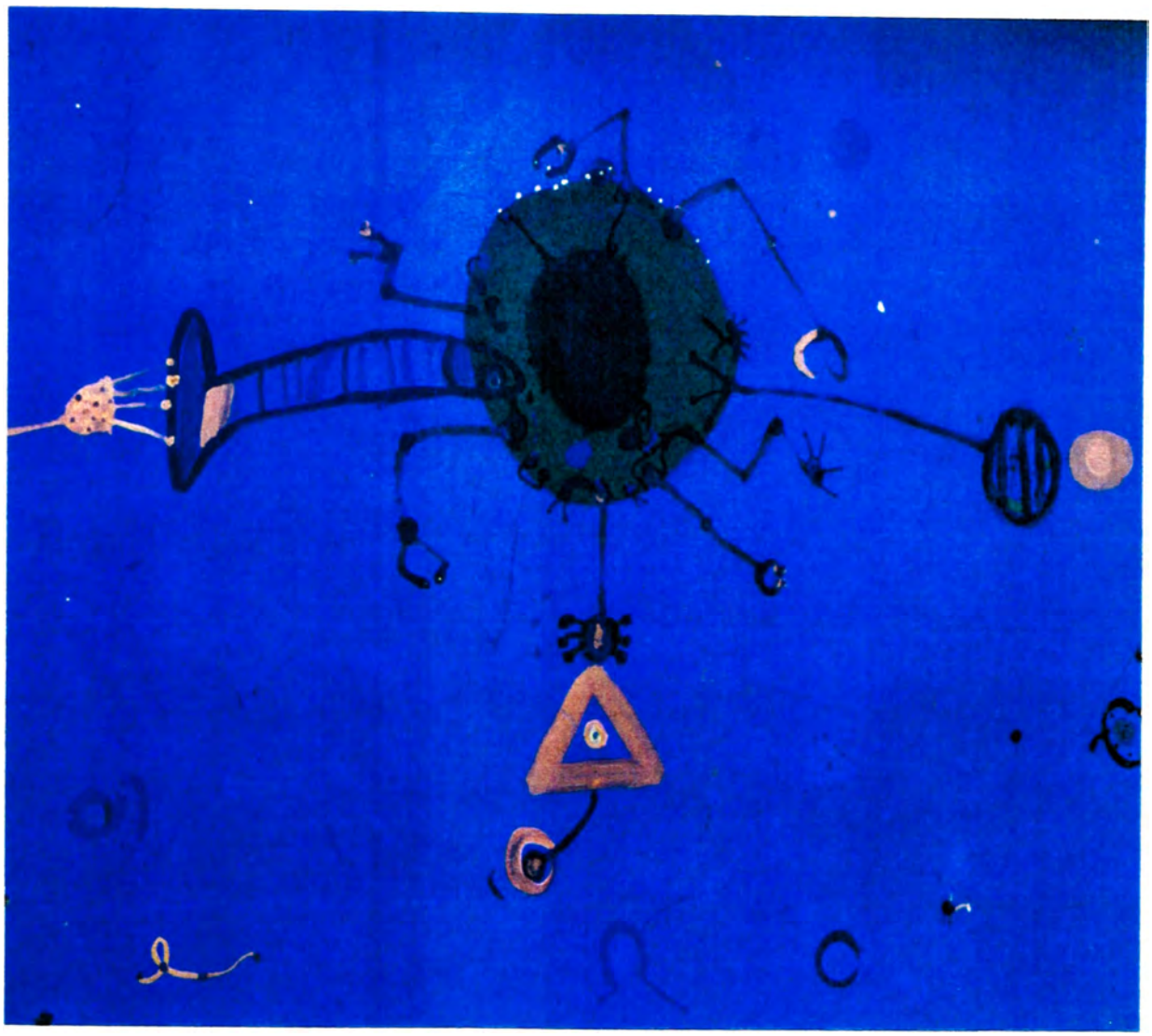


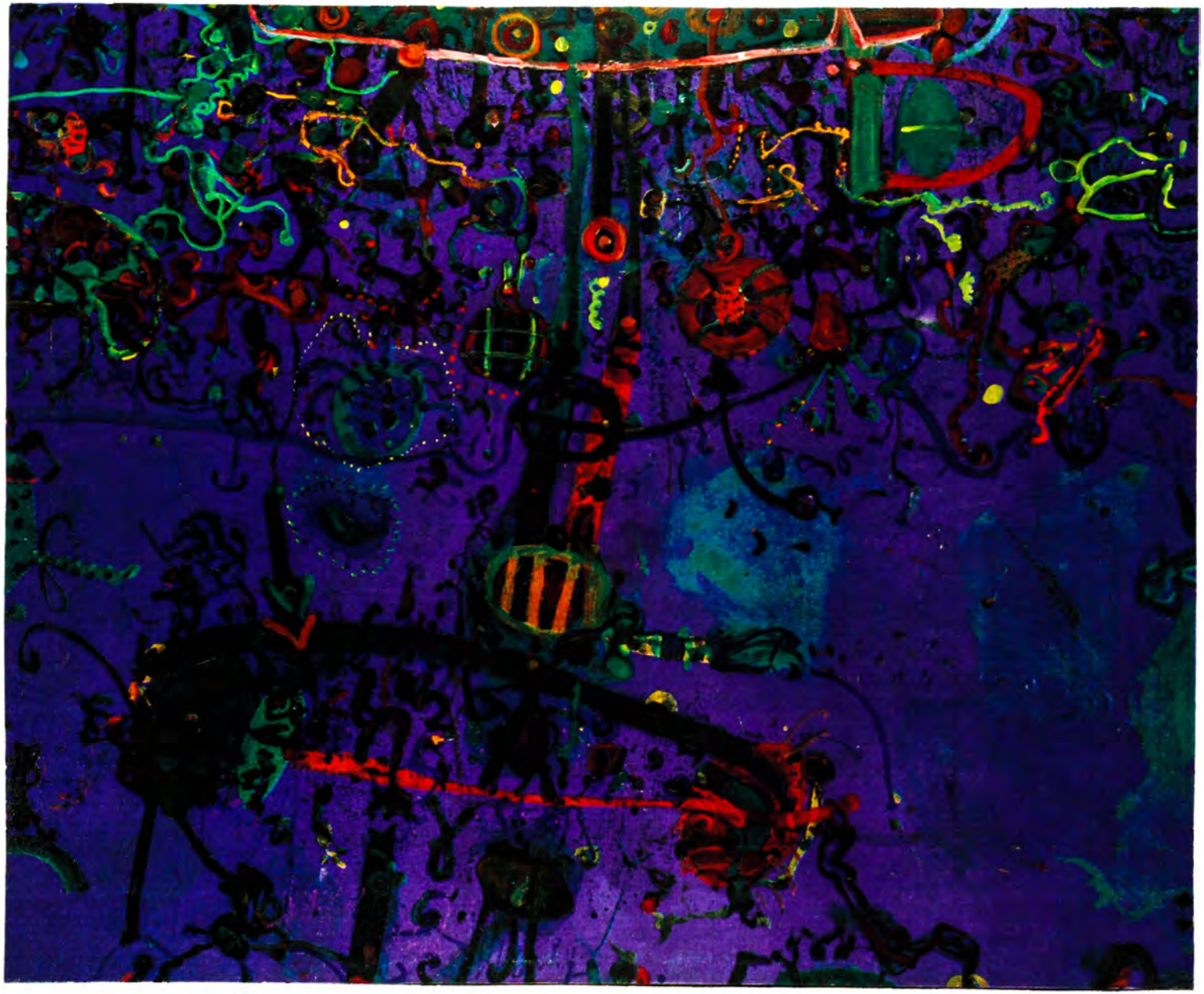
fig.45 *The bay and tidal pool* 1977, oil on marine plyboard, commissioned by the Master Builders Association.
Now in a private collection

pl.72 (a) *Salute to Five Bells* (detail)

pl.72 (b) *Salute to Five Bells* 1972/73, synthetic polymer on eight hardwood panels, 2.90 x 21.3metres, north foyer of main concert hall, Sydney Opera House. Courtesy of the Sydney Opera House Trust

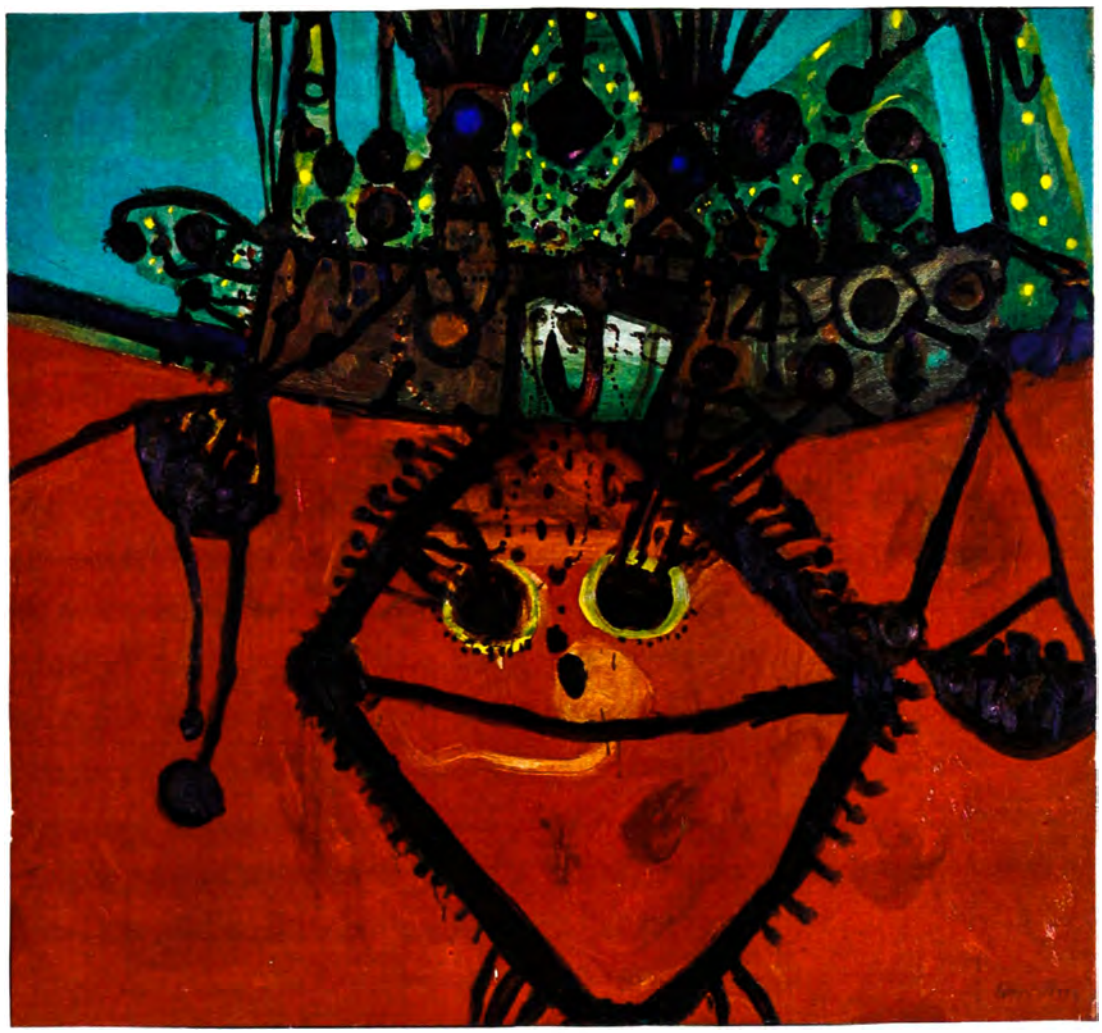


pl.72 (c) *Salute to Five Bells* (detail)



pl.73 *The ship passes by* 1973, oil and acrylic on hardboard, 183 x 244cm. Australian Galleries

pl.74 *Captain Dobbin* 1973, oil on hardboard, 183 x 229cm. Collection: Norman Glen



pl.75 *Newcastle Coalboat* 1973, oil on hardboard, 137.5 x 151cm
Private collection

CHAPTER 9

DISCOVERING WILD AUSTRALIA

Drawing is the reverberation of self against nature.

> *There are many ways of looking at the dilemmas of the latter part of the 20th century with its atom bomb. It presents a huge question mark and the imminent or possible destruction of the world itself. Yet one thing that really strikes you in the environments I was working in is the abundance and generosity of life and life forces. The urge for life is a staggering thing and we just ought to take notice...There is such a fecundity in this universe called a lily pond.* [319]
>
> John Olsen

During the 1970s, John Olsen's work was largely shaped by the journeys he made to a range of locations around Australia. In contrast with the stereotypes of the bush as an endless spectrum of gumtrees, or of the interior as an alienating place of 'fearful sameness',[320] Olsen discovered the immense diversity of the country - in its rainforests, wetlands, estuaries and lily ponds; in the spectacle of Lake Eyre in flood in the middle of the desert. He later wrote that in the course of these travels, working with film-makers, Ken Taylor and Robert Raymond,[321] with the scientist, Dr. Douglas Dorward, and with the well-known naturalist, Vincent Serventy, his eyes were opened to Australia as a place of 'remarkable natural wonder, whose forms had received very little scrutiny from Australian artists',[322] with the exception of the original inhabitants, the Aborigines.

Olsen noted that before World War II it was often considered eccentric to love Australian fauna and flora.

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[319] John Olsen, interview with the author, Queensland Art Gallery, 1985.

[320] Interview with Robert Macfarlane, *Radio Times*, BBC TV and Radio, 6-12 April 1974, p.6. This coincided with the screening of the 'Wild Australia' series on the BBC, United Kingdom. Olsen noted that in contrast with 'the conception that Drysdale and Nolan have given us about the desert having an awful sameness', he wanted to show that 'the damn place is full of life'.

[321] Olsen worked with Robert Raymond on the film 'The Coming of Man', which was part of the 'Shell's Australia' series, 1975. In a particular sequence of the film Olsen discusses Aboriginal rock engravings, which were an ongoing source of inspiration to him.

[322] John Olsen, *My Complete Graphics*, Australian Galleries and Gryphon Books, Melbourne, 1980, p.48.

> This was and still is expressed in prissy lawns, rose gardens and iceland poppies ordered by unimaginative suburbia. It is therefore most encouraging to see, within the last twenty years, the emerging concern of Australians for their natural environment...We have to die a little from our European heritage in order to live again.[323]

These journeys revealed more than 'landscape' to Olsen; they revealed habitats abounding with life. It was the ecological confirmation of an intuitive guiding principle which underpinned so much of his earlier work: the interconnection of a multiplicity of living organisms, in a constant state of flux. There was a logical continuation from his *You Beaut Country* series of the early 1960s swarming with animal and vegetal life, to his experiences in the 1970s of various habitats 'intensely (but not logically) crowded with organisms competing for place and resource'.[324] However, while the former was essentially an imaginative reconstruction of the Australian ethos, his later works were much more closely allied to an intimate observation of the natural world, or what has been aptly described as a 'passionate nearness to things'.[325]

One of the most distinctive transitions to occur in John Olsen's work was the heightened concentration of his graphic skills in his drawings and prints of individual bird and animal species, which revealed an acuity of perception together with an inventive, often humorous response.

Olsen's work throughout the decade needs to be viewed as a process of overlapping sequences, of one investigation leading to the next as his grasp of the individual species and different environments continued to develop and expand. There is, for example, a continuous linking thread between his initial close observations and spirited drawings of spoonbills and pelicans which began during the 'Wild Australia' series, their inventive application in the Lake Eyre period in the audacious *Pelicans* (fig.47), and the large lithographs in the *Down Under* portfolio (see fig.48) which Olsen worked on with the master printer, Fred Genis, towards the conclusion of the decade.

The groundwork was laid early in 1971, when Olsen was invited by Ken Taylor to join in the production of the 'Wild Australia' television series for the Australian

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323 Bianca McCullough, *Each Man's Wilderness: Reflections by Australian Artists*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1980, p.68.
324 Douglas Dorward, *Wild Australia*, William Collins, Brisbane, 1977, p.6.
325 Gary Catalano, *An Intimate Australia: The Landscape and Recent Australian Art*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1985, p.105.

Broadcasting Commission. The principal aim was to document the fauna, particularly the bird life, in natural habitats ranging from Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory to Bass Strait in the south. It was also a concerted attempt to make television audiences aware of the diverse resources in their own country, before the preservation of the local environment became a fashionable concern.[326] Taylor, the director of the series, recalls the 1960s:

> Wildlife for the most part happened somewhere else...on safari in Africa or beneath the skeins of wild geese across the saltings and marshes of Europe. Throughout those years as we searched about for subjects for television, we had casually overlooked the natural history resources of a continent.[327]

Olsen participated in four episodes of 'Wild Australia': 'Beyond the Dune', 'At the Edge of the Salt Plain' and 'Against the Escarpment', all filmed in 1971, and 'The Diminishing Rainforest', filmed in 1972.[328] Each program was undertaken over a three-week time span, which meant that he could continue with other work in the interim periods. The idea was to provide an informative and vital series by bringing together the knowledge-base of a natural scientist and the creative perceptions of an artist. At first Olsen was hesitant about accepting Taylor's offer:

> It was an enormous decision to pull back and start drawing objects again. To certain abstract friends and confreres of mine, it implied... a kind of sell-out. I always remember what Paul Klee said after a trip to Morocco: 'The first thing I must do is disappoint my friends'. What is implied is a new sense of independence and freedom. One may be wrong, but there is nothing more enervating than trying to repeat a past experience. I think it is better to be totally wrong and free...One of the difficulties I always had with much of Abstract Expressionism was that it had implications of the object but very little observation in it, as opposed to the mystical, observable factor that does come through in primitive art. Their powers of observation were extremely strong – be it in Lascaux or Altimara or any of the cave paintings we see in Australia.[329]

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326 Ken Tatlor, interview with the author.

327 Ken Taylor, 'Natural History Filming in Australia', a paper presented to the British Kinematograph, Sound and Television Society's 'First International Wildlife Film-makers' Symposium', held in Gloucestershire, England, February 1976. (Transcript courtesy of Ken Taylor.)

328 Australian Broadcasting Archives: 'At the Edge of the Salt Plain' was filmed on Townsville Common, Queensland; 'Beyond the Dune' on the Coorong, South Australia; and 'Against the Escarpment' at Arnhem Land on the Northern Territory.

329 John Olsen, interview with the author.

From the early stages in the production of the 'Wild Australia' series, Olsen found that being out in the wild and observing sights such as the jabiru (Australian stork) floating above him on the thermals with complete independence and control was to experience a state of grace; a world away from the vagaries and 'staggering pettiness' of the art world.[330]

There was a close rapport between John Olsen, Ken Taylor and the natural scientists, Bob Warneke and Dr Douglas Dorward (a lecturer at Monash University). Olsen worked closely with Dorward, the script writer and presenter of the series, and they were both stimulated by the commonalities and diversities in their responses to the natural world. Olsen was impressed by the way that Dorward looked at nature as process, which provided a connection with his own way of working. It was an empirical view of science based on observation and exploration, as opposed to theory and dogma.

For Olsen, the macrocosm and microcosm, near and far, had long assumed an equal significance in his work, a factor now reinforced through first hand contact with the way the camera could move in and out of the subject, as well as with direct observation of the enlargement of forms under a microscope. Olsen noted in his *Salute to Five Bells* journal in 1972 that these technological developments did not preclude an emotional response to the subject but, on the contrary, allowed the artist to 'probe deeper into the hidden world – the world of inner feeling'.[331]

Participating in the 'Wild Australia' series also introduced Olsen to new disciplines and methods of working and he often familiarised himself with the particular species and habitats by making quite detailed sketches and written notations as a way of building up his visual dictionary. He later described this process:

> I am a wandering minstrel, wandering through a strange landscape. What I mean is that, to begin with, you draw everything. For me the field drawings are just endeavouring to get my vocabulary straight; to put a few sentences together in pictorial terms. When I do them I am not thinking in any terms of 'art'. I am just having a look and noting things down in a kind of shorthand method.
>
> After a time you begin to develop preferences. You say, 'I am simply mad about pelicans', or, 'I am simply mad about frogs'. Somehow you seem to pinpoint certain things which mean something to you,

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330 *Radio Times*, op.cit.
331 John Olsen, *Salute to Five Bells*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1973, unpaginated.

> even though you can't explain it. I mean, what is a frog? A frog waiting to be kissed so he can turn into a prince![332]

At another time he noted, 'You have to wait for nature's rhythms but you also have to be very observant and quick, your eye has to seize a split second'. Olsen continually surprised Dorward and Taylor with his facility in drawing, to capture fleeting movements and particular mannerisms of the different bird species with a striking economy of means. Dorward observed that he complemented the filming process in a special, experiential way:

> [While] the camera was still waiting for the essential degree Kelvin ...John could freeze the dancing leap of the brolga...caricature the gulping pelican chick feeding from its parent's maw, and merge a hundred banded stilts into one amorphous protected flock.[333]

Although Olsen's drawings were more closely allied to naturalistic appearances than ever before, his works were removed from scientific illustration and he constantly challenged academic notions and preconceived ideas. As Dorward noted, Olsen's representations 'cannot and should not be dissected'. He continued: 'If they are, his species might sometimes seem new to the ornithologist; his brolgas might occasionally have more than the usual number of toes or his spoonbills eat more than their expected share of frogs'.[334]

Olsen and Taylor also recall travelling with a poem called 'Corsons Inlet', by the American poet A.R. Ammons. 'It showed us a new way of creatively approaching the natural world'. The poem describes a walk along the shoreline both in terms of close observation and of a liberation from strictures and preconceived ideas.

> *I allow myself eddies of meaning:*
> *yield to a direction of significance*
> *running*
> *like a stream through the geography of my work:...*
> *gathering for flight:*
> *an order held*
> *in constant change: a congregation*
> *rich with entropy: nevertheless, separable, noticeable*
> *as one event,*
> *not chaos:...*[335]

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332 John Olsen, interview with the author, Queensland Art Gallery, 1985.
333 Dorward, op.cit., p.10.
334 ibid., p.6.
335 See *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, Third Edition, W.W. Norton & Company, New York and London, 1983, pp.1255-1258.

One of the advantages for Olsen of working on the series was that he was able to visit environments restricted to public access. Such was the case on the location of 'Beyond the Dune', filmed in an area in the Coorong in South Australia, inhabited by one of the largest colonies of the Australian pelican. As a result of repeated violations of these birds for over a century, the South Australian government had declared the place a prohibited area in 1962.[336] When the 'Wild Australia' team arrived, Olsen was provided with a view of hundreds of pelicans at different stages of development. He was struck by the fantastic appearance of this bird, with its squat body and phallic beak, which became the subject of many subsequent drawings and prints.

Another memorable location of the 'Wild Australia' series for Olsen and Taylor was that of 'At the Edge of the Salt Plain', filmed on Townsville Common. At that time the Common was brimming with thousands of water birds – brolgas, ospreys, masked plovers, egrets and cormorants. Taylor recalls that Olsen responded rapidly to the visual feast. The main focus of the study was the brolga, and in *Brolgas dancing* (pl.77), as well as several gouaches, the artist was able to convey with a few calligraphic strokes, the balletic movements of these at once elegant and gangling birds. For Taylor, Olsen provided new insights and challenges in the course of filming:

> You can't see a brolga the way he drew them unless you film them in slow motion and then stop the frame. I can remember a physical shock...I remember thinking, 'How can I use that?' John could see something that I couldn't see for a very long time. He could see instantly that the brolga (the crane) is really a very ancient species. It is primeval and awkward. When it comes in to land, its legs do drop down like that. Hitherto, all my mental impressions of cranes were [of] sinuous and graceful creatures flying away. That is the way that the Japanese and Chinese saw them; only very few saw what John saw.[337]

While the nature of the camps was quite different on each location, a constant factor was the lively atmosphere and intense discussions that would begin in one series and be continued several months later in the following episode. For the most part, Olsen took care of the cooking and generally kept up the spirits of the group. In

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[336] Dorward, op.cit., p.68. Dorward records instances over the past century of 'deliberate attempts to destroy the birds of the region', of egg-breaking raids and the killing of thousands of birds for bounty.

[337] Ken Taylor, interview with the author.

Arnhem Land during the filming of 'Against the Escarpment', their camp was a series of tents out in the open. Taylor vividly recalls the mood of the time:

> It was just before the wet season and it was unbearably hot. We had a camp table with an umbrella in the centre of it and John did a sign, 'Cafe Royale'...Every night we would have a swim and John would make this beautiful meal. John and I would hop in this big billabong and laugh and splash about. The scientists wouldn't go in. The crocodiles used to come and watch us. One night we heard this almighty scraping sound - we were on top of the bank...in a zillionth of a second![338]

Both at Townsville Common and in the wetlands of the Northern Territory like Fogg Dam, Olsen was stimulated not only by the individual species but by the sense of the whole, pulsating mass of living creatures – of birds, fish, crustaceans, worms and insects – that inhabited the swamps and marshes in the wet season. He perceived that while they were contradictory in appearance, 'they all belong to a chain of links that tie each to the other'.[339] This was the case even in the smallest habitats, such as a single lily leaf, where Dorward pointed out a jellied blob of snail's eggs and under a little flap of the leaf's edge, a water-dwelling caterpillar.

At Fogg Dam, the weather was so hot that filming generally commenced very early in the morning. In Olsen's large oil, *Fogg Dam* (pl.76), based on earlier watercolour sketches, he captures the magical tranquillity of the scene at daybreak, as a monastic-looking bird merges with the subtle grey-greens of the myriad aquatic plant life within the swamp. Here he employs a high horizon line, as in some of his paintings of the late 1960s, suggesting the curve of the earth.

Olsen continued to explore this sense of the burgeoning water world after repeated visits to North Queensland during the 1970s and into the 1980s. In gouaches such as *North Queensland Lily Pond* (pl.81), he once again delineates particular forms – the spatula beak of a spoonbill, tiny, spritely frogs, lily pads and flowers – while all around them the paint is applied in washes, is stippled, is allowed to form pools and puddles. In a related print, *Tropical Rainshower*, Olsen noted that he wanted 'the viewer to see the microcosm & at the next moment the expansiveness of the universe.'[340] Olsen later summed up his feelings about these environments:

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338 ibid.
339 Olsen, *My Complete Graphics*, op.cit., p.132.
340 ibid., p.132.

> Working on these projects really altered my way of looking at things because I could see not only bird-life but a whole range of biology. It is so staggeringly fragile. You have to have the estuaries and the waterlands to have the birds, the frogs, the crustaceans. In David Attenborough's film series he indicates that life really began in the water and after thousands of years creatures left the water. There is still in those beautiful lily ponds that whole kind of structure that is the beginning of life. It just burgeons itself in tropical countries.[341]

In a sequence of the last 'Wild Australia' film in which Olsen took part, 'The Diminishing Rainforest', we discover him near a waterfall holding in his hands a glistening, little, wet frog. This was the start of his passionate fascination with these agile amphibians. In his notebooks, Olsen made sketches of these creatures, closely examining their structure. This intimate acquaintance established, a plethora of frogs followed into the Lake Eyre period and through the 1980s. He was entranced by their vital energy as well as by their disjointed quality: 'the crazy articulation of their limbs, which corresponds with a sense of mental dislocation'.

The frog has rarely been the subject of such intense study by any other Western artist. To find the equivalent, one has to look to the East, to the 'incisive, humorous, oddly abbreviated' Sengai brush drawings[342] and to Japanese haiku, in which poetic feeling is compressed within the smallest number of syllables. In the 1970s, Olsen recalled his early interest in Japanese poetry, which had begun two decades earlier. As early as 1957 he had quoted the modern founder of the haiku, Basho, in his journal:

> *A solitary frog drenched in*
> *rain*
> *Rides on a basho leaf*
> *unsteadily.*

Although in exhibitions in the 1970s there was occasionally an over-abundance of frogs in accordance with Olsen's obsessive personality, no two frogs were ever the same. He often did a large number of drawings before he was able to reach one that captured the essence of this spirited creature. His early lithograph, the liberated *Tree Frog* (fig.52), which came out of his experience in the 'Wild Australia' series, remains one of his best in its sense of spontaneous energy captured through the swift, expressive application of line. In one of his art classes, Olsen related the story of a Chinese calligrapher commended to do two lines of poetry for the emperor:

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341 John Olsen, interview with the author.

342 See Edmund Capon, *Sengai: The Zen Master*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1985, unpaginated. Catalogue for travelling exhibition of paintings from the Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo.

> Two years elapsed, and when an envoy was sent he found the man surrounded by volumes of practice lines. At last the calligrapher pronounced himself ready to do the ten-foot scroll. Taking the sumi brush and loading it from the suzuri, he did the complete poem in the single moment required.[343]

While Olsen's frogs generally reveal his capacity for an uninhibited sense of fun, he also agreed with the writer D.T. Suzuki who noted that, while the frog might not ordinarily seem a beautiful creature, being 'insignificant to call out poetical comment', to the Buddhist Japanese nothing that takes place in the world is insignificant. 'The frog', he wrote, 'is just as important as the eagle or the tiger; every movement is connected to the primary source of life'.[344]

Olsen's repeated references to Oriental art and philosophy throughout the 1970s were not based on some hypothetical construct applied at whim. He did not attempt to rigorously emulate particular examples of Chinese or Japanese art but, rather, felt a profound affinity with some of the underlying concepts applied in such work. His understanding of Oriental culture had developed after years of reading and study and was linked with his search for a spiritual dimension in his life and art. In *My Complete Graphics* he wrote:

> The Chinese are right – God is known by the example of nature...It is awfully difficult for me to follow the Hebrew Christian tradition, apart from the Sermon on the Mount, [it] promises so many rewards and retributions that it appears like a folk story to me...The Chinese and Japanese through the Taoists and Buddhists are just so divinely subtle. They are the first ecologists. Man is an organism related to every living thing.[345]

Another significant aspect of the Taoist philosophy for Olsen was that, in contrast with Western determinist principles, it admitted a certain illogic which paradoxically came closer to an experience of real life: that all things are in a continual state of flux, admitting polarities of yin and yang, passive and active forces. Olsen noted that Australians are often too yang, too full of the aggressive, masculine principle: 'I

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[343] *John Olsen's Notebook*, collected and arranged by T.J. Woodward, based on a series of workshops conducted by Olsen in 1969, 1975 and 1976 at the 'Grange' Campbell Town, Tasmania.
[344] D.T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Bollingen Foundation, New York and Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1973, pp.182, 183. Similarly Capon, op.cit., notes: 'Whilst the sound of a frog leaping into a pond might seem prosaic, to Sengai that brief isolated sound may be like "satori"...It is the poet who sees poetry in what, to ordinary senses, is without poetry'.
[345] Olsen, *My Complete Graphics*, op.cit., p.150.

see it in myself and I dislike it'.[346] The need for a sense of balance between extroversion and contemplation found direct expression in Olsen's work in an unusual way from the mid-to-late 1970s: through his discovery of the paradoxical nature of the Australian interior at Lake Eyre.

[346] ibid., p.170.

Left: fig.46 *Pelicans Feeding* c.1972, ink and wash on paper from John Olsen's 'Wild Australia' sketchbook.
Centre: fig.47 *Pelicans* 1978, ed.40, lithograph, 76 x 57cm (sheet), printed by John Robinson, Druckma Press.
Right: fig.48 *Spoonbills and Swamp Frogs* 1979 (*Down Under* portfolio) ed.50,
colour lithograph, 90 x 63.5cm, printed by Fred Genis, published by Port Jackson Press, Sydney

fig.49 *Banded stilts*, *Coorong*, pen and ink drawing, 'Wild Australia' sketchbook

fig.50 *Laughing Frog* 1976, sugarlift on Arches paper, ed.90, 94 x 64cm, printed by Max Miller, published by Port Jackson Press, Sydney

fig.51 *Frog in the Rain* 1975, etching on Arches paper, ed.50, 80 x 70cm,
Crossley Print Workshop, Melbourne

fig.52 *Tree frog* 1973, lithograph on Arches paper, ed. 25, 76 x 57cm, published by Rudy Komon Gallery

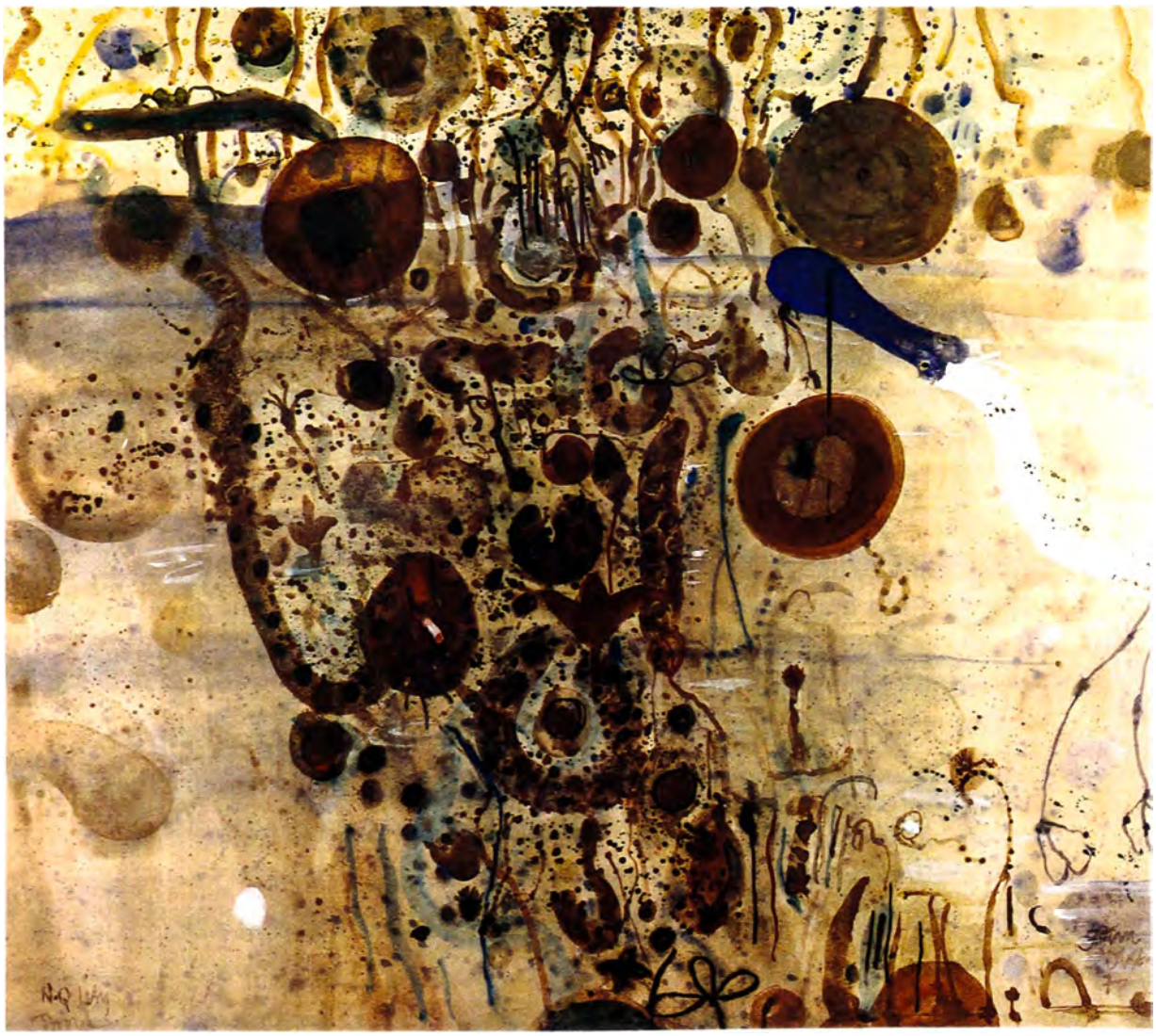
pl.76 *Fogg Dam* 1974, oil on board, 92 x 128.8cm. Collection: Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory, Darwin

pl.77 *Brolgas dancing* (undated), gouache on paper, 34.5 x 39.2cm
Private collection

pl.78 *Brolgas: Townsville Common* (undated), gouache on paper, 43 x 52cm
Private collection

pl.79 *Heron and Eel, Fogg Dam*, undated,
gouache and watercolour on paper, dimensions unkown,
illustrated in 'Wild Australia' by Douglas Dorward (see bibliography)

pl.80 *Lily pond* 1987, watercolour and pastel on paper, 189 x 99cm
Private collection



pl.81 *North Queensland Lily Pond* 1978,
gouache, watercolour and pastel on paper on board, 115 x 123.5cm
Private Collection

CHAPTER 10

LAKE EYRE: THE EDGE OF THE VOID

The lake might be viewed symbolically as an unconscious plughole of Australia, a mental landscape, as is the habit of painting and writing. Because it is 13 metres below sea level – and perhaps nowhere in Australia does one have the feeling of such complete emptiness - covered by a bowl of endless sky with inviting silences, there is, as you stand on the edge of the lake, a feeling that you are standing on the edge of a void.[347]

John Olsen

Towards the end of 1974, John Olsen became captivated by the extraordinary events taking place in the centre of Australia at Lake Eyre. The vast expanse of eerily silent, salt-encrusted desert had flooded for only the second time since white settlement in the country. What had been described at the turn of the century as 'the Dead Heart', 'one of the most forbidding and treacherous places on earth',[348] now burst into life, abounding with myriads of birds, fish, mammals, reptiles, insects and wildflowers. It was the largest flood for five hundred years and the first time in recorded history that Lake Eyre north had flooded through the Goyder Channel into Lake Eyre south, covering a distance of 175 kilometres, three times the size of Sydney Harbour. The nineteenth-century explorers' dream of an inland sea had become a living reality.[349]

For an artist who remarked in the early 1960s that the unexpected and unpredictable are always interesting, an 'ocean' teeming with life in the middle of the desert was fertile territory for the eye and the mind. From the time of his first visit in late October 1974, Olsen developed an obsessive fascination with the place and returned several times over the following three years, witnessing its reversion to a crystalline desert from a full, brimming lake. In the many drawings, prints, watercolours and oils which resulted from these visits, we find the artist responding on multiple levels to the varied arena of the lake and the tributaries that brought it into being.

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347 John Olsen and Vincent Serventy, 'The Dead Heart Lives', *National Times*, 17 - 22 February 1975, quote from Olsen, p.31.
348 See J.W. Gregory, *The Dead Heart of Australia*, John Murray, London, 1906.
349 See Vincent Serventy, *The Desert Sea: The Miracle of Lake Eyre in Flood*, MacMillan, Melbourne, 1985.

In 1973 Vincent Serventy had witnessed the prelude to the great flood when torrential rains in the Channel Country in the north gradually penetrated the dry desert landscape 'as each swamp, lake, billabong and river bed filled and water crept south', preparing the way for the unimpeded flow of the mammoth floods of the following year.[350] In March 1974, Serventy visited the full lake and, on his return to Sydney recalls that his accounts of the remarkable spectacle made Olsen impatient to see it for himself.[351]

For Olsen, the lake 'shaped like Salvador Dali's bent watch'[352] was a place of contradictions, of life and death, fullness and emptiness. Here he could celebrate the 'festival of life' in the myriads of creatures in and around the lake, and direct his vital, calligraphic lines into the long, pulsating channels and rivers which travelled through hundreds of kilometres of desert towards Lake Eyre. Life approached the lake, clinging to its edges; however, the lake itself was a place for contemplation, a vast, engulfing space: *the void.*

The concepts of 'the void' and 'the edge' were of seminal importance to the development of Olsen's work during this period: to the serene atmosphere and reductive qualities found in many of his works, where the empty spaces are as important as the marks themselves, and to the line probing space, becoming the edge, where things meet, end and begin again.

Olsen's notion of the void did not imply a negative response to the interior but related instead to the paradoxical nature of the full and empty lake, the 'ocean' and the desert which, in turn, found a direct correspondence with his interest in Oriental philosophy. On the one hand when he stood at the edge of the full lake there was an overwhelming feeling of space and light, of 'inviting silences' and a sense of 'complete emptiness'. In his *Salute to Five Bells* journal he noted, 'Remember the Tao – a jug is made of clay but the use of the jug is in its emptiness'.[353]

On another level, Olsen recognised that the full lake was inextricably 'entwined with the eternal destiny of the empty lake',[354] with its deceptive mirages and blinding salt deposits, to which it would inevitably return; the same arid landscape which had come to wide public attention when the British speed ace, Donald Campbell, broke

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350 ibid., p.2.
351 ibid., p.6.
352 John Olsen, 'Olsen at the Centre: Notes from an artist's journal', *Aspect: Art and Literature*, Spring Edition, 1975, edited by Rudi Krausman, p.41.
353 Olsen, *Salute to Five Bells*, Angus & Robertson, op.cit., unpaginated.
354 Olsen and Serventy, *National Times*, op.cit., p.31.

the world land-speed record there in 1964.[355] The temporary nature of the full lake intrigued Olsen, as he commented to the author:

> The enigma of it all. It is a desert and it can be full. After the rains it is so incredibly abundant; so what you are looking at in one place, as if through an act of the Dao, becomes full. It is a very profound thing ...It has an effect on you when you are there because all the time it is impossible for you to accept fully the sense of impermanence and transitoriness. Somehow it affects you...you realize that you are looking at an illusion really. I don't think that there is anything more Buddhist than that.

For Olsen, Lake Eyre represented 'a soul place'; a metaphysical and conceptual landscape, enriched by geological, historical and mythological associations.[356]

The history of the lake goes back beyond the Dreamtime, about 100 million years ago, when it was originally a much larger lake called Lake Dieri by pre-historians. With the onslaught of aridity some 30,000 years ago, a gradual transformation occurred. At various times, a number of Aboriginal tribes lived along the banks of the lake until it became too inhospitable for human survival.[357] Olsen noted that they also kept away because they believed that in its depths lived the great Kuddimukra spirit, a sinister snake with the head of a kangaroo which pulled creatures under the lake's surface.[358]

The awesome emptiness of the dry lake was confronted by nineteenth-century explorers such as Edward John Eyre, who had set off from South Australia in 1939 (when the colony was only four years old) 'to lift the veil on the interior' in the hope of discovering new pastoral land. On his arduous journey north of the Flinders Ranges, Eyre came to an area he thought was still Lake Torrens but was, in fact, the southern part of the lake that would later be named after him. On 23 August 1940 he wrote in his journal:

> I penetrated into the basin of the lake for about six miles and found it so far without surface water...from the extraordinary and deceptive appearances caused by mirage and reflection, however, it was impossible to tell what to make of sensible objects, or what to believe on the evidence of vision. All was uncertainty and conjecture in this region of magic...The whole scene partook more of enchantment

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355 See Serventy, *The Desert Sea*, op.cit.,p.23.
356 See also Sandra McGrath, 'A Remote Eden', *Art and Australia*, vol.14, no.2, 1976, p.140.
357 Roma Dulhunty, *The Spell of Lake Eyre*, Lowden Publishing, Sydney, 1973.
358 Olsen, *Aspect: Art and Literature*, op.cit.

> than reality, as the eye wandered over the smooth and unbroken crust of pure white salt...lit up by the dazzling rays of the noonday sun, the effect was glittering and brilliant beyond conception.[359]

However, this strange enchantment was also a source of great despair, for this huge expanse, which Eyre was also to describe as a 'vast, low and dreary waste', barred his entry into the interior and left him with a sense of doom and failure. The famed explorer, Charles Sturt, who did manage to penetrate further into the interior – into the Simpson desert (discovering and naming Cooper's Creek) – failed to realise his own long-held objective. 'I could not help but think', he wrote in the course of this harrowing expedition in 1845, '...from the appearance of the country as far as we had gone, that we could not be very far from the outskirts of an inland sea. This idea I may say haunted me'.[360]

The accounts left by these explorers were familiar to Olsen and Vincent Serventy, who often reflected on their efforts and unfulfilled dreams and expectations. When they arrived at what had become an 'inland sea', Serventy wrote:

> It was incredible to stand on top of the high dunes and see a new world instead of the desolation we had read about in the journals of the previous explorers...There was a huge expanse of inland sea with the freshness of a light 'sea breeze' ruffling the surface, while from overhead came the cry of gulls so typical of sea shores, so untypical of this normally most desolate area of Australia.[361]

During the course of these visits, Olsen experienced the lake and its surroundings in almost every conceivable way: camping on its shores, intimately exploring the life along its banks and around its edges, flying over it in a light aircraft, travelling across its engulfing spaces by boat to points where no land could be seen. On his first attempted circumnavigation of the lake with Serventy, their heavily laden boat was struck by a westerly wind squall and capsized; their provisions floated away and sank irretrievably into the lake, 'a discovery', as Olsen put it, 'for future anthropologists'.[362]

Olsen found the experience of working with Vin Serventy enlightening, commenting, 'There are very few people in Australia with such an overall vision of

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[359] Ann Millar, *I See No End to Travelling: Journals of Australian Explorers 1813 - 76*, Bay Books, Sydney and London, undated, p.123, quoted from Eyre's journal.
[360] ibid., p.139, quoted from Sturt's journal, January 1845.
[361] Olsen and Serventy, *National Times*, op.cit., p.28.
[362] Olsen, *My Complete Graphics*, Australian Galleries and Gryphon Books, Melbourne, 1980, p.58.

the country – its bird life, animals, rain patterns, geology and history'. With Serventy, he explored the plethora of life around the lake, filling many sketchbooks with drawings and gouaches. 'It was fascinating to see John at work', Serventy noted. 'We would sit companionably watching the crimson chats, each recording in his own way. I had pen and paper as well as a camera and telephoto lens.'[363] He was also intrigued to see that before beginning work on a small flower or insect, Olsen would use a hand lens to study the intricacy of it before taking up his brush.

Olsen noted that Serventy's way of looking at the natural world in terms of one thing leading to the next, corresponded with his own ideas about the creative process: 'one image begets another, suggests another, becomes ambiguous, loaded with associations and complexities'.[364] Now, in the course of their investigations, they would, for example, track the 'footprints' of various creatures: the small dots left by hopping mice; dingo tracks leading to a patch of fur – the remains of a rabbit that had been too slow; the long, sinuous, angular shapes where a lizard had been the previous night.[365]

The extent to which John Olsen, by 1975, was able to integrate his direct experience of nature with his intuitive, imaginative response was revealed in a number of striking drawings including *Birds by the Lake*, where he allows a brush loaded with Chinese ink to expand and contract into the fantastic shapes of the birds beaks, or to find linkages – a bird's wing becomes the thin horizon line; the broad webbed foot of a pelican joins with a spoonbill, which in turn extends to a frog. When he viewed the landscape from above, this close contact with the life around the lake also provided the artist with an understanding of the intimacy of form and line.

In Olsen's large oil paintings he pits microscopic details against an aerial perspective. In their spatial orientation, he agreed with the advice of an eleventh-century Chinese treatise: 'Landscapes are large things. He who contemplates them should be at some distance; only so is it possible for him to behold in one view all shapes and atmospheric effects'.[366] A number of these paintings depart from the fecund robustness of his works of the early 1960s and present instead a tranquil, detached and sparsely populated world. Olsen's meditative response to the subject

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363 Olsen and Serventy, 'The Battle to Survive', *National Times*, 24 February - 1 March 1975, p.26.
364 Olsen, *Salute to Five Bells*, op.cit.
365 Olsen and Serventy, 'The Battle to Survive', *National Times*, op.cit. Serventy noted: 'Such study was part of Aboriginal education and was essential to survival. Our tracking skill was primitive by comparison, but we could work out simple stories'.
366 Olsen, *My Complete Graphics*, op.cit., p.126.

and simplification of forms provide a logical continuation from paintings undertaken at Dunmoochin in Victoria and the *Salute to Five Bells* mural. In an interview with James Gleeson he commented:

> I do think the Opera House mural had a very big influence on what I was subsequently to do because...there is in that picture a quietness and a building up to an emotion and I learned a lot from that and think that it is very much related to the Lake Eyre pictures later on – much more calculated in a broad sense. I'd also got to admire Morandi...the nature of the additions, little accent notes. The character of them was to enlarge the metaphor, to make it broader.[367]

In *Lake Eyre* (pl.82), the thinly applied veils of muted colour in the lake, encapsulating the reflected sun and a minute bird traversing the openness, relate to *Lake Hindmarsh, the Wimmera* (pl.66) painted five years earlier. In both instances, Olsen was stimulated by Oriental art where 'the creator plays a daring game in which emptiness is stretched to the limits'.[368] Here, the sense of a vast space is heightened by the tiny confetto marks and inflexions along its edges.

Olsen and Serventy flew over Cooper's Creek in 1975 when the flood waters were hundreds of kilometres wide in places. 'We first saw Cooper's Creek from the air', noted Serventy, 'as a pattern drawn by giant fingers'.[369] In Olsen's painting, *Coopers Creek in Flood* (pl.85) he emphasises the essential form of the river against the smaller details seen front-on, amongst which appear a small fried egg and bizarre little faces and figures, like urban visitors from his previous paintings.

Olsen had long been interested in the conception of bodily identification with the landscape. Now he found that flying over the lake or a river might call to mind a 'transparency and transference from one object to another', so that it 'might well look like a microscope looking at an embryo'.[370] There are repeated references to birth and life in the Lake Eyre works, most obviously in the womb-like shape of the lake itself. In a number of related prints in the *Edge of the Void* series, he effectively uses the sugarlift and aquatint techniques to convey the sense of life energies moving towards the open space of the lake, recalling micro-organisms wriggling, connecting, separating and multiplying.

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367 Interview with James Gleeson, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 9 April 1979.
368 Bianca McCullough, *Each Man's Wilderness: Reflections by Australian Artists*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1980, p.68.
369 Serventy, *The Desert Sea*, op.cit., p.36.
370 Transcript of John Olsen's Perth Festival lecture, Art Gallery of Western Australia, 16 February 1978.

Olsen explored the shifting, fluctuating mood and atmosphere of the lake. His use of colour in his oil paintings and gouaches was at times guided by the subtleties of light merging sky, land and water: 'Lake turning rose – sky meeting lake like a Mark Rothko, melting pieces of marble cake'.[371] In other instances, the lake became a magnetic field drawing a mass of streaming, brightly coloured lines towards its amniotic world. Conversely, in *Dark Void* (pl.86), painted after he had seen the lake beginning to dry up, he encapsulates a tougher, more sombre, brooding sense of the place (and self) in the accentuation of the dark-brown rim of sludge around the lake, from which a very small self-portrait extends into its crystalline emptiness.

For Olsen, the sense of the unpredictable emanated not only from the paradox of a temporary ocean in the desert but also from the array of creatures inhabiting it and parading along its banks. While his attempts at vitality in the large oils occasionally appeared laboured, it was in his prints and drawings that his ingenuous wit and acute powers of observation came to the fore: in his depictions of gawky, quizzical emus, splayed camels loping amidst the dunes, and unfettered, leaping, diving frogs. In his etchings in the *Lake Eyre: The Desert Sea* and *The Edge of the Void* series (printed by Max Miller), Olsen combines a sense of spontaneous ease with precisely etched, enquiring lines, as in the elastic-necked *Emus by the Lake*.

Olsen and Serventy were often accompanied on their journeys to Lake Eyre by other artists, including Tim Storrier and Frank Hodgkinson, as well as the sculptor Joel Elenberg. On a couple of occasions they were also joined by Stuart Purves from Australian Galleries. From the time of his initial visit, Olsen very much wanted to travel into the lake to the point where no land could be seen, but to do that they needed a sturdier boat capable of carrying adequate provisions. Purves saw to the arrangements for this more substantial vessel and accompanied Olsen, Serventy and Elenberg on the journey:

> It seemed extraordinary dragging a boat through many kilometres of desert. We spent about five days living on the lake, which was the thing that John had always wanted to do – to go to these islands where no one had been before and to get the sense of the vastness of it. For him, Lake Eyre was the globe, in a way, and the islands were like countries and the birds were like messengers and we were able to camp out on the islands and feel on our own...We thought of the early explorers while we were there and we read from Alan

371 Olsen, *My Complete Graphics*, op.cit., p.36.

> Moorehead's book when we were at the mouth of Cooper's Creek.[372]

Perhaps nowhere more than in his minimal etchings such as *Coopers Creek enters the Void* and gouache drawings such as *Goyder Channel* (pl.87) is the 'divine subtlety' which Olsen perceived in Buddhist philosophy more eloquently expressed. In *Goyder Channel* the sinuous, probing line is emphasised by the void of the paper which it traverses. Line is the boundaries of the channel; it is the edge, at one with the spindly legs and claws of the birds. The minimalism of this work brings to mind the Symbolist poets such as Mallarmé, who believed that, 'the intellectual core of the poem conceals itself, is present...in the blank space that separates the stanzas and in the white of the paper: a pregnant silence, no less wonderful to compose than the lines themselves'.[373]

The circular shape in works like *Arrival at the Void* (pl.88) recalls the Eastern symbol of the mandala. It is towards this symbol of eternity and wholeness that the inflections of gangly birds' legs descend and along its edges, amidst the finely spattered markings, that animated birds appear to leap and dance. It is the arrival at the source of life, at 'the still point of the turning world'.[374] In 1958 Olsen had noted in his journal the Zen concept of freedom of the spirit:

> Like water filling a pond is free...always ready to flow off again, it can work its interchangeable power because it is free, and be open to everything because it is empty. This state is essentially a primordial state and its symbol, the empty circle, is not empty of meaning for him who stands in it.

Although these contemplative works reveal new areas of exploration in John Olsen's development, there was a continual overlap of emptiness and fullness, serenity and ebullience. At times, the expression of the latter recalled aspects of his earlier work, as in *Pelican and Emu Egg* (fig.57), where a multiplicity of forms once again dominate in a kind of bouillabaisse of real and imaginary creatures and abstracted forms, or in *Kangaroo Entering the Void*, where he reasserts dynamic, muscular brushmarks.

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[372] Stuart Purves, interview with the author, 1990. See Alan Moorehead, *Cooper's Creek*, Hamish and Hamilton, London, 1963.

[373] See John Elderfield, *The Drawings of Henri Matisse*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1984, p.107. Quoted from *Mallarmé: Selected Prose, Poems, Essays and Letters*, The John Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1956, p.105.

[374] This phrase, often quoted by Olsen in relation to Lake Eyre, comes from T.S. Eliot's poem, *Burnt Norton*. See T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, Faber & Faber, London, undated, p.15.

The profusion of calligraphic lines which had become Olsen's hallmark were translated in some of the large oils of the period in his depictions of the complex river systems that had brought the lake into being. Following torrential rains in 1975, John Olsen and Vin Serventy flew over the desert country – 'a sodden mass of sand, splotched with hundreds of narrow lakes held together by the clay floors lying between the dunes'.[375] In *The Simpson Desert approaching the Void* (pl.89) Olsen reveals this transformation of the tough, arid country into a network of throbbing life-lines, like a giant nervous system crawling across the land, turning it into a luminous green oasis.

The vast aerial view set against a teeming, microscopic field of activity is expressed in *Channel Country in Flood* (pl.90), a daring work in which Olsen manipulates the overall composition of the landscape into the shape of a hill, bracketed by dark, broadly painted areas which in turn accentuate the details within it. Close observation also reveals a number of portraits inhabiting the edges of the landform, melding with the mass of little dashes and speckled notations.

By 1976, with periods of no rain, it became evident to John Olsen that 'a biological transition was taking place', as the rivers and creeks gradually began to dry up; as the earthly paradise of the huge Lake Eyre basin returned to its former arid state of predominantly glistening, crystalline rock salt and red salt mud. Likewise, the plethora of life retracted, the fortunate escaping; the fledgling birds and shoals of fish dying along with their water world.

Towards the end of the decade, Olsen recalled his experiences of the enigmatic lake in a number of large, masterful watercolours on Japanese Torinoko paper including: *Owls over a Drying River* (pl.83), *The Rookery* (pl.91) and *Dying Creek Bed* (pl.92). In the latter the myriad life forms and once nurturing rivers and pools are shown to be coalescing – the long erratic, brown river turning into the spatula beak of the spoonbill – sinking back into the salty landscape.

The gossamer lightness and silvery tones of the long, stringy legs of the bird in *The Rookery* correspond with the thin rivers of translucent watercolour which stream down the page, overlapping a pelican drawn with brevity and panache. It was, in a sense, Olsen's homage to the rookeries of thousands of gulls and pelicans nesting on the islands in Lake Eyre which he had the rare opportunity to observe at close

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375 Serventy, *The Desert Sea*, op.cit., p.33.

quarters.[376] While many of the late watercolours evoke an evanescent, floating world, a sense of the microcosm and macrocosm persists, as in *Owls over a Drying River* (pl.83). Here, spatial openness is combined with precision of drawing. Tentacle-like lines extend from the delineating edges of the drying river bed, while a self-portrait emerges from the geological stratifications.

Olsen's experience of the Lake Eyre landscape, whether impregnated by the full lake or as observed as a dry, sparsely inhabited arena of glistening mirages, seldom equated with the idea of the Australian interior as a threatening wasteland, a place to be dreaded. Instead, he recognised the sustenance that not only fullness, but also emptiness, had to offer. 'On a spiritual level there is no fear in our wilderness. It is enormously refreshing. If we attempt to understand this void and its ways, it will cleanse our feelings and emphasise our perspectives to a sense of place.' [377]

For Ken Taylor, who had invited Olsen to participate in the 'Wild Australia' series, the works that emerged from the later journeys to Lake Eyre were an inspiration, as his poem on the subject reveals.

John Olsen at Lake Eyre 1977

Beneath that sun
he could paint the dry rivers and
occasional waterholes,
flick across the membrane
of the earth
(thin,
drawn as a rabbit gut),
colours matched to the memory
of a Ming dynasty vase
(a light blue, white
and brown),
search for seeds and speckled eggs
and other patterns so long hidden
on the reedless, thick-papered surface
of that salt
flat and
faded
place.

Ken Taylor [378]

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[376] After one of these visits Olsen commented that to be allowed access to such a rookery was 'the most sacred thing that can happen to a person'; ibid.
[377] Bianca McCullough, op. cit., p.68.
[378] Ken Taylor, *A Secret Australia*, Rigmarole Books, Melbourne, 1985, p.71.

Throughout the 1970s, between the journeys into the interior, John Olsen was preparing for exhibitions on the Lake Eyre theme in his studio at Dural. Major exhibitions during this period were held at Australian Galleries in Melbourne in 1975, 1977 and 1980; at Rudy Komon Gallery in Sydney, Greenhill Gallery in Adelaide and Ray Hughes Gallery in Brisbane in 1975; Barry Stern Gallery in Sydney in 1978 and Lister Gallery in Perth in 1980.

Compared with the large number of impressive oils in the 1960s, Olsen's work in the 1970s became increasingly diversified and his strengths were often particularly evident in his works on paper. With the benefit of hindsight, the developments in his art are most effectively comprehended by taking an overview of one exhibition leading to the next, like the journeys themselves.[379] In this way it is possible to gain insights into Olsen's abilities to extend and interrelate the array of themes in different media: to counterpoint an incisive drawing of an individual creature or a line traversing the void of the page with the broad perspectives of the serene lake in many of his watercolours and oils such as *Lake Eyre*, or with the myriad of interconnecting river systems in *Channel Country in Flood.*

From the time of the 'Wild Australia' series and into the Lake Eyre period, the consensus of critical opinion was that, while the oils in individual exhibitions were inconsistent, Olsen's most original contribution to extending our insights into the natural environment came through the close-up renderings of bird and animal life. These displayed a vitalistic energy and intensity of graphic means, and in many of the gouaches and watercolours effectively conveyed a new lyrical sensibility in the interpretation of the landscape.[380] At the time of his exhibition at Australian Galleries in 1977, Graeme Sturgeon wrote in the *Australian*:

> When Olsen is true to himself he continues to be an artist of considerable ability, salting away images of the wild, wide reaches of the outback, tawny and desiccated, yet filled with life, which are unique to Australian art and which contribute to the creation of a national self-awareness and sense of identity.[381]

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[379] In summary there were some fine oils such as those illustrated here, however the work of the period, including some of the large watercolours, was uneven. As discussed in relation to the process for choosing works for the publication and the John Olsen Retrospective, it was necessary to provide a sense of the transitions that occurred during this period while at the same time being very selective. By taking the period in overview rather than in terms of specific exhibitions, it was possible to select what I considered to be the best representative images.

[380] Although at the time of Olsen's exhibitions at Australian Galleries in Melbourne and Lister Gallery in Perth in 1980 some critics regretted the loss of his more calligraphic lines of the 1960s, others recognised his considerable sensitivity as a watercolourist. For more detailed information on specific articles see Bibliography: Selected Reviews.

[381] *Australian*, 5 August 1977.

For John Olsen, the Australian landscape and wildlife were more than external phenomena: they provided ways of charting new territories of creative exploration where close observation and firsthand experience became the springboard for ideas and metaphorical connections. He agreed with the concept expressed in Chinese painting that 'the particular outward appearance of things, or indeed their accuracy, was...of secondary importance to capturing the essence or spirit of the subject'.[382]

The balance between contemplative stillness and paring away of extraneous details on the one hand, and focussed attention and energy (the 'ch'i') in the swift, dynamic application of line on the other, was further explored towards the end of the decade in his *Earth Hold* etchings, printed by Max Miller, to accompany poems by Jennifer Rankin, and in the *Down Under* series of lithographs printed by Fred Genis.

Olsen had worked closely with Miller on his Lake Eyre etchings – *The Edge of the Void* and *Lake Eyre: The Desert Sea* (published by Port Jackson Press). Their interest in Oriental art and ideas was shared by the poet Jennifer Rankin and this commonality emerged strongly as they worked together on the *Earth Hold* series. The etchings do not so much illustrate the poems in a didactic way as link up with some key idea or essential mood. The subtle sense of parallel visions is apparent in works such as *Night Bird*(fig.59) and *Jessica's Poem*(fig.60). In the former, literal correspondences with the words are tenuous. Instead, Olsen has captured something of the dark feeling of the poem in the mysterious form of the owl quietly descending with the filigree traceries of a leaf, like a transparent shadow, appearing over the centre of the form. On a technical level the artist noted, 'I still don't know how we got the fretted leaf effect, its one of those imponderable law of chances'.[383]

Jessica's Poem is more personal. In Olsen's etching there is an obvious connection with the works of the late 1970s relating to Lake Eyre and the desiccation of life forms. Here a little girl is standing in the landscape pointing out at the mother whose arm reaches into the picture plane in a protective gesture. In *My Complete Graphics* Olsen noted: 'Neither I, nor Jenny knew at the time that she had cancer of the breast. I am quite amazed how the breast is accentuated in this etching. There are haunting black shadows'.[384] The poem itself provides a strange sense of foreboding:

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382 See Edmund Capon and Mae Anna Pang, *Chinese Painting of the Ming and Qing Dynasties*, Art Gallery of New South Wales in association with the International Cultural Corporation of Australia, Sydney, 1981.
383 *My Complete Graphics*, op.cit., p.180.
384 ibid., p.184.

Wet sand and the moon sings
behind dark cliffs.

A fisherman is holding the waves
finger resting against his line.

At the lake prawns wait for their tide.
Our black shadows clump on the beach.

My daughter is tucking herself into my side.

We wait and the moon sings
circling behind the trees of the black cliff.

Across the beach a lamp flares
fisherman pulls at his hat
paces himself, walking into the waves.

Behind us the prawns and old moon faces.
We wait and the moon sings to my daughter
burning now by a slow sea.[385]

Taking an overview of the collaboration, poems and etchings combine sparseness with a strong feeling for wildlife and a sense of place. As British poet, Ted Hughes, wrote:

> These free, strange, open forms in both poems and etchings are close to the mineral and biological source...And they draw on a new, surprising perception – that Australia belongs to the Far East, that her natural expressive sensibility is beginning to find real root affinities in the spiritual worlds of the Far East. [386]

The highpoint of Olsen's achievement in lithography in the 1970s came through his experience of working with Fred Genis, who had set up a studio near the artist at Dural. Genis had established an international reputation as a master printer, having worked with De Kooning, Rosenquist and Rauschenberg, among others.[387] After years of close observation of bird and animal life, Olsen now allowed his expressive and intuitive response to come to the fore in the printmaking process in the *Down Under* series (see figs. 61-63). Genis introduced him to the process of working on transfer paper which, Olsen noted, was 'fabulous for picking up brush marks, any stain or blot'.[388] In *Bird and Kangaroo* and *Bird and Kangaroo Landscape*, the

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385 Jennifer Rankin, *Earth Hold*, illustrated by John Olsen, Secker & Warburg, London, 1978, p.22.
386 Comments by Ted Hughes, ibid., back cover.
387 See Olsen, *My Complete Graphics*, op.cit., p.206.
388 ibid., p.210.

spontaneous, gestural swish of the brush becomes the bird taking off, and the extended, angular strokes are both abstract markings and suggestive of the long limbs and paws of the kangaroo at one with the landscape.

John Olsen's fascination with animal life was taken further in 1978 when he travelled to Africa: to Egypt, Kenya and South Africa. He was particularly enamoured with the giraffes and monkeys – the African equivalents of the emus and frogs. He perceived, in the ambidextrous activities and energy of the monkey, a possibility for exploring a continual somersault of reducing and expanding form and line. Olsen's monkeys often reveal a wry wit as well as strange human qualities, as in *Monkey Confused by the 20th Century* (fig.65).

Olsen continued to draw these creatures on visits to Australian zoos in the 1980s and, towards the end of the decade after another visit to Africa, he also did a number of luscious, large gouaches and watercolours of dark elephants with extended trunks splashing about in cobalt blue water, as well as interminable-necked, honey-coloured giraffes; subjects which admirably suited the format of the large sheets of Torinoko paper.

Perhaps more than any other Australian artist, John Olsen has invested the animal world, in his many drawings, prints, gouaches and watercolours, with a zestful energy and sometimes tender, often humorous insights.[389] Occasionally the images are quite charming and elegant, while in other instances they are as daring and erratic as the creatures themselves. The aim was not perfection but discovery. When working on his large *Black Faced Monkeys, Kenya*, he commenced with the notion of quite classical forms and then rapidly began to distort, adding vigorous pastel lines and repeated arcs that provided an edginess to the whole. At the time he noted to the author that he was struck by the way that his early training with Passmore in drawing still came back to him.[390]

Although, for coherence, these animal studies are viewed as a group, they did not occur in isolation and Olsen often worked simultaneously in his studio on other subjects and large oils. They should not be considered as ends in themselves but as part of the whole web of life that makes up Olsen's world, and as vital linkages in his ongoing explorations in the process of drawing:

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[389] It should be noted that Brett Whiteley also did many fine linear drawings of animals, including his well known *London Zoo* series in the 1960s, although his monkeys and caged creatures do often have a more intense psychological presence that in part reflects his interest in Francis Bacon.
[390] John Olsen, interview with the author.

John Olsen drawing monkeys at Adelaide zoo. Original photograph by Trina Tepper. Courtesy of the *Adelaide Advertiser*.

> The act of drawing is closely linked to...an organism;...everything has its own life force and energy. I am really endeavouring to find the satisfactory conclusions to those energies and hence one thing plays against another and I don't know what is going to happen because the thing has its own life. I know that part of my interest in monkeys and frogs is their crazy ability to articulate limbs in a strange way. It is the exploratory feeling that finally finds an integration that is terribly important. So when you talk later on about the portraits, you discover that the hands or the look of Bonnard are really not very different from that of a frog.[391]

In Australia, the decade of the 1970s witnessed a number of significant changes in the art world. The transition from the parochial views of the 1950s had begun to occur with the 'art boom' in the 1960s. However, it was not until the 1970s that the arts assumed a high priority at government level. Olsen noted, in an interview with Nick Waterlow in the *Nation Review* in 1977, that the Whitlam government played a significant role during the first years of the decade and that the support of the arts, together with the willingness of government to indemnify increasingly valuable international collections, would result in 'a better educated Australian'. He also commented:

> It is so important for an artist to have the power of rejection over an enormous bed of knowledge. When I was young I only had a few artists to look at, now a younger man has a much broader body of work to look at: there exists today a much better textured animal called art, and that colonial element has been lost.[392]

Olsen perceived that Australia could no longer be considered a cultural backwater. However, he never had any time for the concept of 'Manhattan internationalism', but consistently believed that it was important to learn from a range of cultures without losing the most vital factor – a sense of place. While the significance of a regional perspective had been widely derided in the art world in the late 1960s, there were an increasing number of supporters of this view by the end of the 1970s. As Leon Paroissien wrote:

> As the concept of an expanding international style of art that did not recognise borders or cultural barriers fell into disrepute, the idea of art springing from the texture of a specific environment – regional art – was restored to credibility.[393]

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391 ibid.

392 *Nation Review*, 12 October 1977.

393 *Australian Art Review*, edited by Leon Pariossien, Warner Associates, Rozelle, 1982, p.7.

During the 1980s, Olsen was to provide continually expanding insights into a range of regional environments outside the metropolitan centres.

Towards the end of 1976, Olsen became a trustee of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. He is remembered by some for his valuable contribution and his exuberant personality, and by others for being difficult and irascible. He had deeply felt views about art and did not always find it easy to distance himself. In a later interview he recreated a typical scene: 'The other board members are sort of sitting there all composed. And I am hanging my heart out...Preposterous! Baudelaire expressed it well with "Committees are the death of love"'.[394] However, with hindsight Olsen felt that he had benefited from the experience, both from the positive aspects and from his mistakes. He recognised the importance of State galleries developing strong and meaningful collections and it was this conviction, a decade later, that prompted him to accept the invitation to sit on the board of trustees of the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra.

Throughout the 1970s, between his journeys around Australia and periods spent in his studio in Dural, Olsen had conducted numerous art classes around the country. His contribution to the arts over two decades in his own work and his commitment to the wider arts community was formally recognised in 1977 when he was awarded the OBE.

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The end of the 1970s also marked the end of an era in John Olsen's personal life. In 1980 he moved to the New South Wales regional centre of Wagga Wagga to live with the artist and printmaker, Noela Hjorth. Olsen had met Hjorth at an exhibition of his prints in Melbourne. Their intense and passionate relationship during the early years of their time together provided him with a new lease on life. However, although he was 'spellbound' by Hjorth and felt impelled to leave his marriage of nearly twenty years, this decision was not without its stresses and anxieties, particularly in relation to leaving his family.[395]

Apart from a brief visit to India, when John Olsen and Noela Hjorth took part in a non-legally-binding marriage ceremony, they were to remain in Wagga Wagga until

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394 Olsen, interview with Lily Brett, *Pol*, March 1983.

395 Evidently Olsen attempted to suppress his mixed emotions as a way of coping. During an interview with the author, Olsen's daughter, Louise, recalled the distress she felt around this period.

July 1981.[396] Olsen had found it difficult to work in Dural in the late 1970s, particularly on large oils. He had begun to experiment with the idea of applying oil paint in broad washes akin to the handling of watercolours, with mixed results. It was during his stay in Wagga Wagga that he painted several of his most beautiful, poetic works. Tinged with hope, they were also more subdued and melancholy than much of what had come before, reflecting in part the sense of loss that accompanied his transition to a new phase of his life and the start of a new decade.

[396] Noela Hjorth's personal views on their relationship are revealed in her autobiographical study, *Noela Hjorth - Journey of a Fire Goddess*, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1989. She recalled that John Olsen had chosen one of her etchings for the Westmead Print Prize, *Faces and Places*, 1979. Hjorth noted that despite her initial wariness, they embarked on what 'seemed like a whirlwind romance' tempered by Olsen's own early signs of doubt when he went to live with her at Wagga Wagga. She also conveys subsequent joys and problems from her own perspective.

fig.53 *Birds by the Lake*, 1976, Chinese ink on paper, 65.6 x 101.6cm.
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

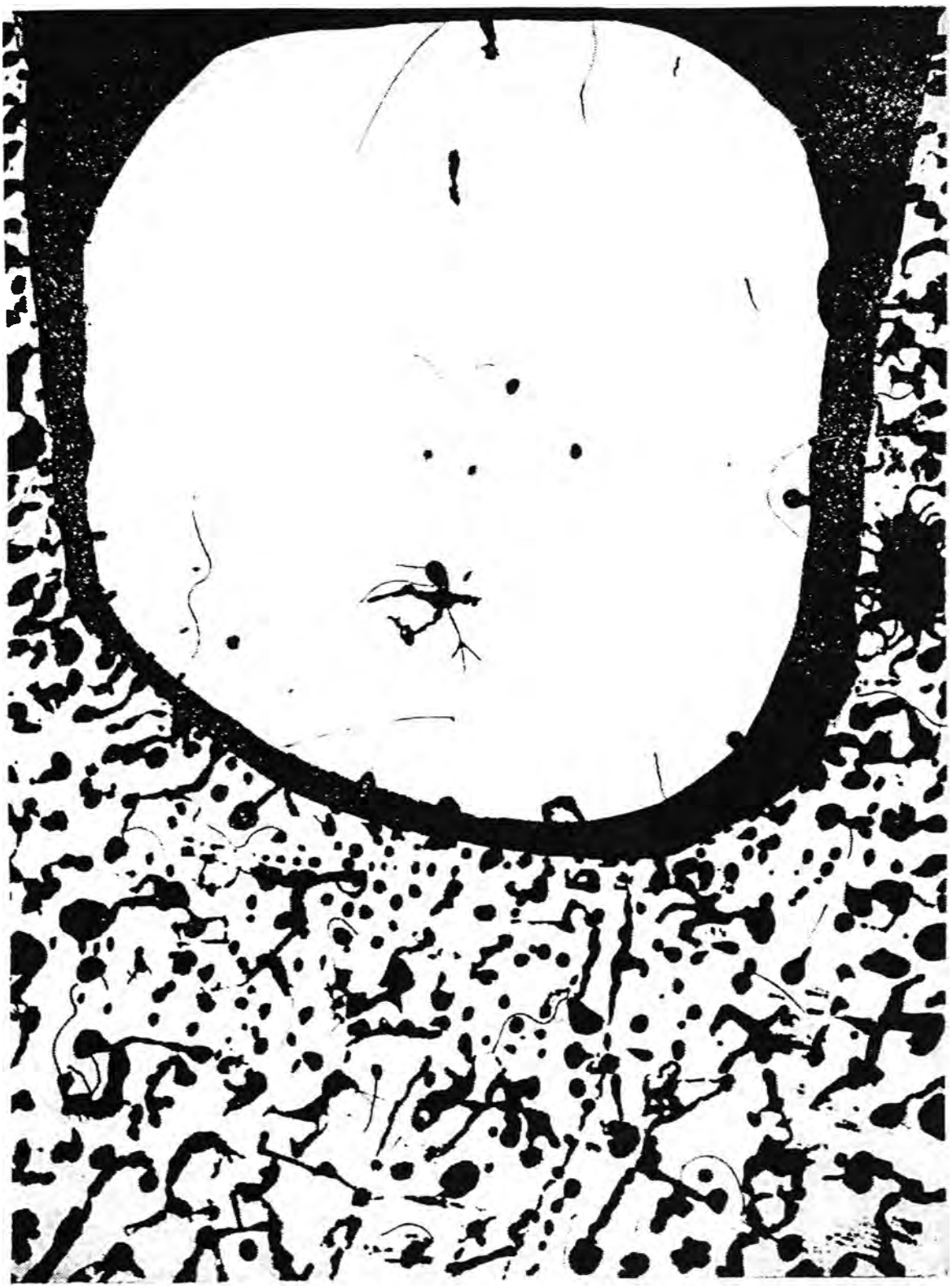


fig.54 *Life drawn towards the Void* 1975, ed.50,
etching and aquatint on Arches paper,
60.2 x 45cm (comp.), 80 x 60.4cm (sheet),
printed by Max Miller, published by Port Jackson Press, Sydney

fig.55 *Emus by the Lake* 1975 (*Edge of the Void* series),
etching on Arches paper, 50.2 x 33.2cm (comp.),
printed by Max Miller, published by Port Jackson Press, Sydney

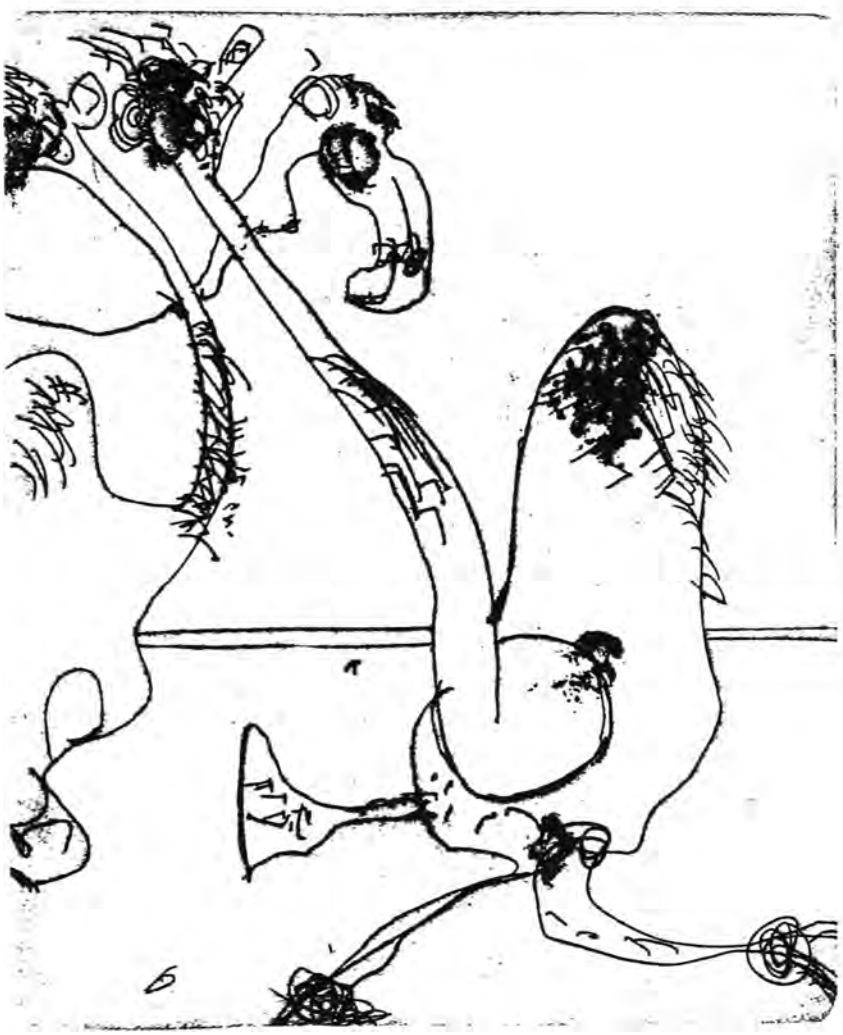


fig.56 *Wild Camels* 1976 (*Lake Eyre and the Desert Sea* series)
etching and aquatint, ed.60, 40 x 33.2cm (comp.),
printed by Max Miller, published by Port Jackson Press, Sydney

fig.57 *Pelican and Emu Egg* 1975, gouache and watercolour on torinoko paper, 192 x 100cm
Private collection

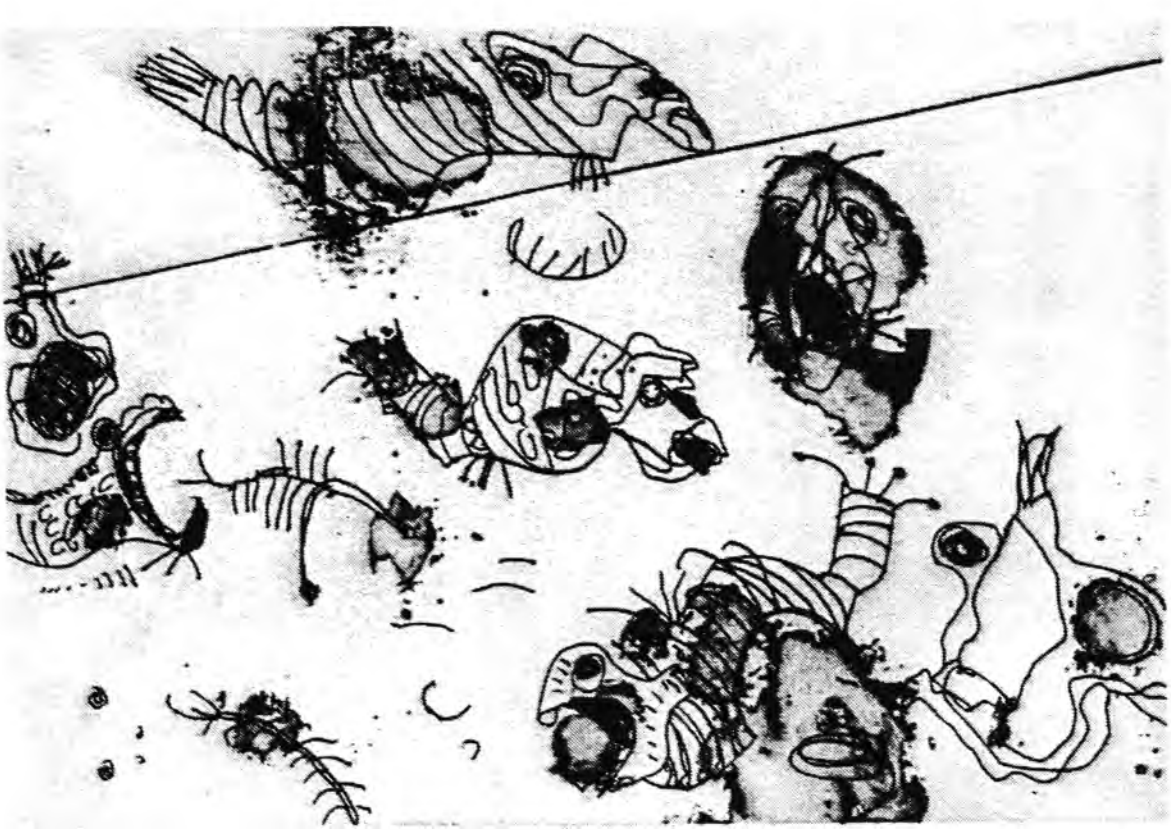


fig.58 *Dead Fish* (*Lake Eyre and the Desert Sea* series), etching and aquatint, 27.8 x 40cm (image), 75.2 x 52.4cm (sheet), printed by Max Miller, published by Port Jackson Press, Sydney

fig.59 *Night Bird* 1978 (*Earth Hold* series) ed.60,
etching, sugarlift and aquatint on Arches paper, 76 x 54cm (sheet)
Printed by Max Miller, Published by Port Jackson Press

fig.60 *Jessica's Poem* 1978 (*Earth Hold* portfolio ed.60) 1978, 76 x 54cm (sheet), etching on Arches paper, printed by Max Miller, published by Port Jackson Press

Prints from the *Down Under* portfolio, ed.50, printed by Fred Genis, published by Port Jackson Press, Sydney
Left: fig.61 *Bird and Kangaroo* 1979, colour lithograph on Arches paper, 91 x 63cm (sheet)
Centre: fig.62 *Back O'Bourke* 1979, colour lithograph on Arches paper, 91.5 x 63cm (sheet)
Right: fig.63 *Bird and Kangaroo Landscape* 1979, colour lithograph on Arches paper, 91 x 63cm

fig.64 *Monkey Hanging* 1981, ink, wash and pastel on paper, 80 x 59cm
Collection: The Christensen Fund

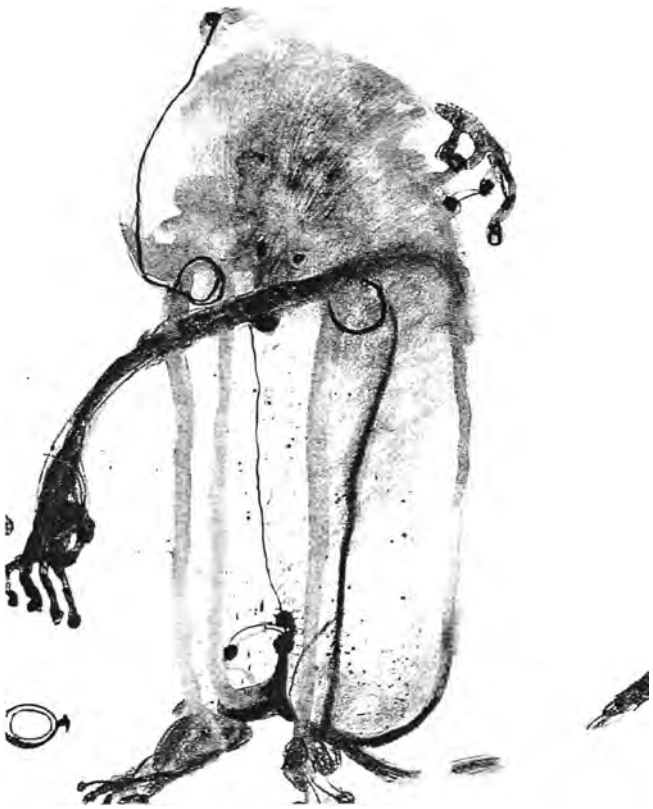


fig. 65 *Monkey Confused by the 20th Century* 1981,
ink and pastel o paper, 80 x 59cm
Collection: The Christensen Fund

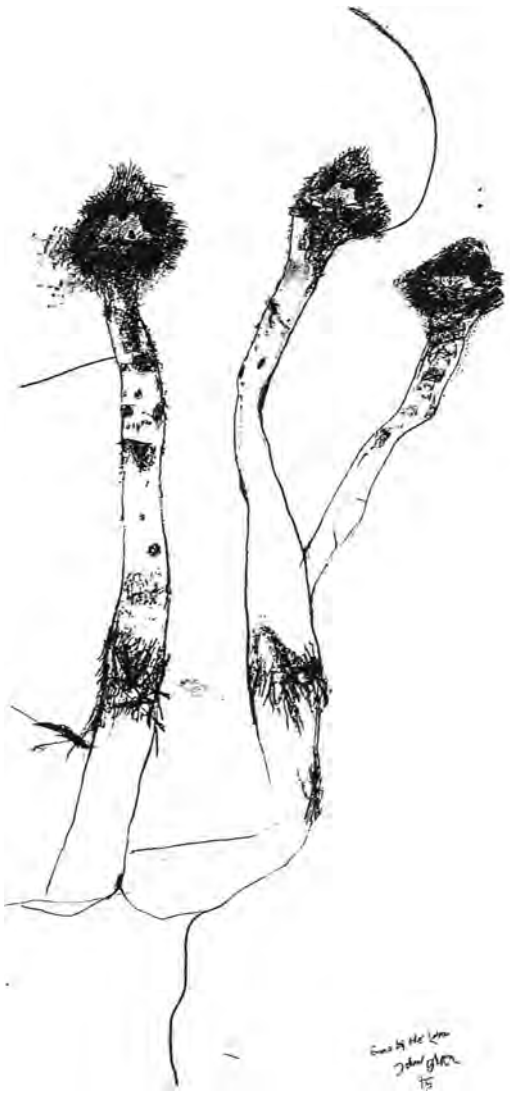
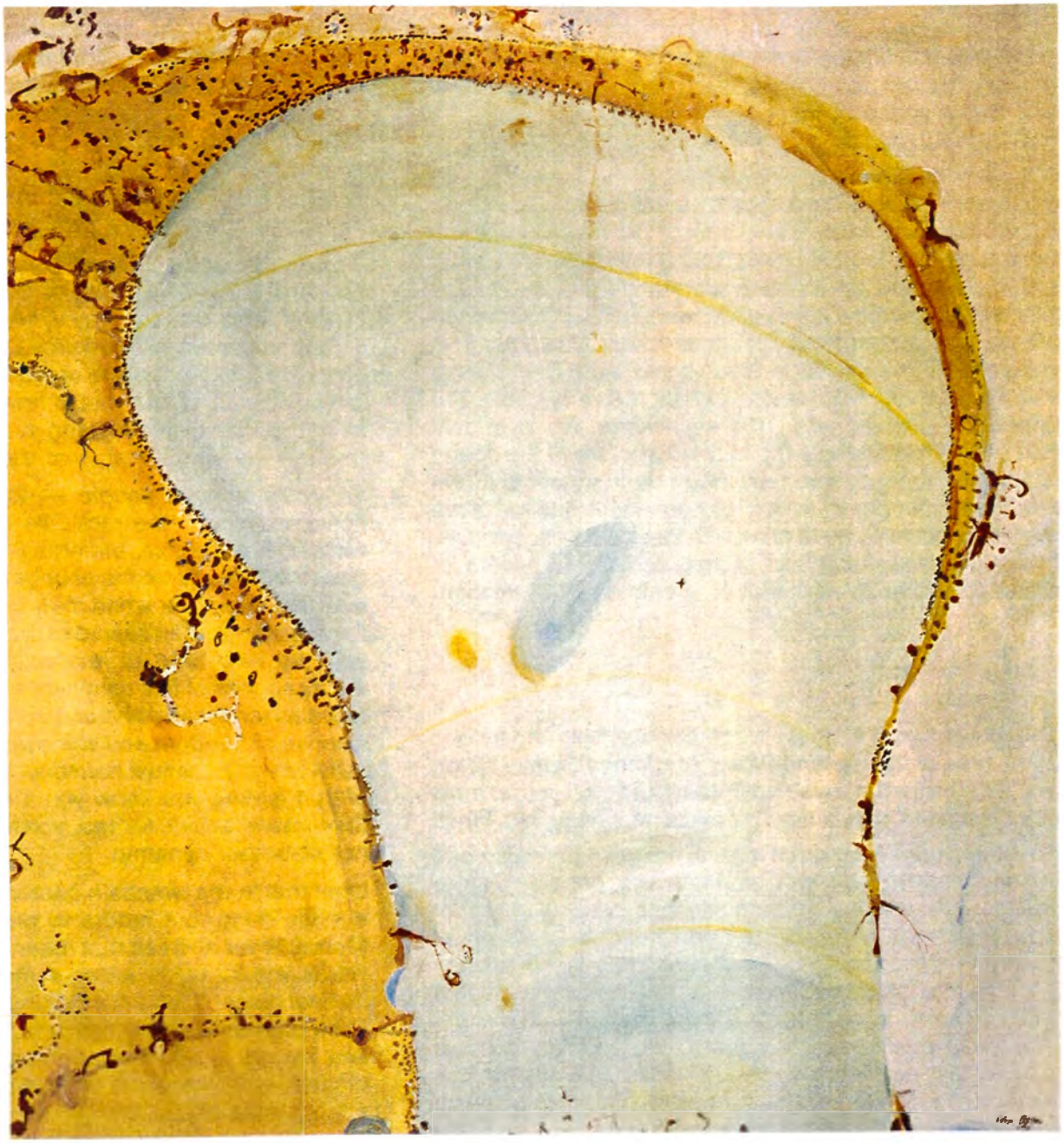


fig.66 *Emus by the Lake* 1975,
charcoal and pastel on paper, 192 x 100cm
Collection: Australian Galleries



pl.82 *Lake Eyre* 1975, oil on canvas, 124 x 200cm
Collection: Australian Galleries

pl.83 *Owls over a Drying River* 1980,
watercolour and gouache on torinoko paper, 192 x 100cm
Collection: Australian Galleries

pl.84 *Avocet Pond* 1976, watercolour on paper, 80 x 84cm
Private collection

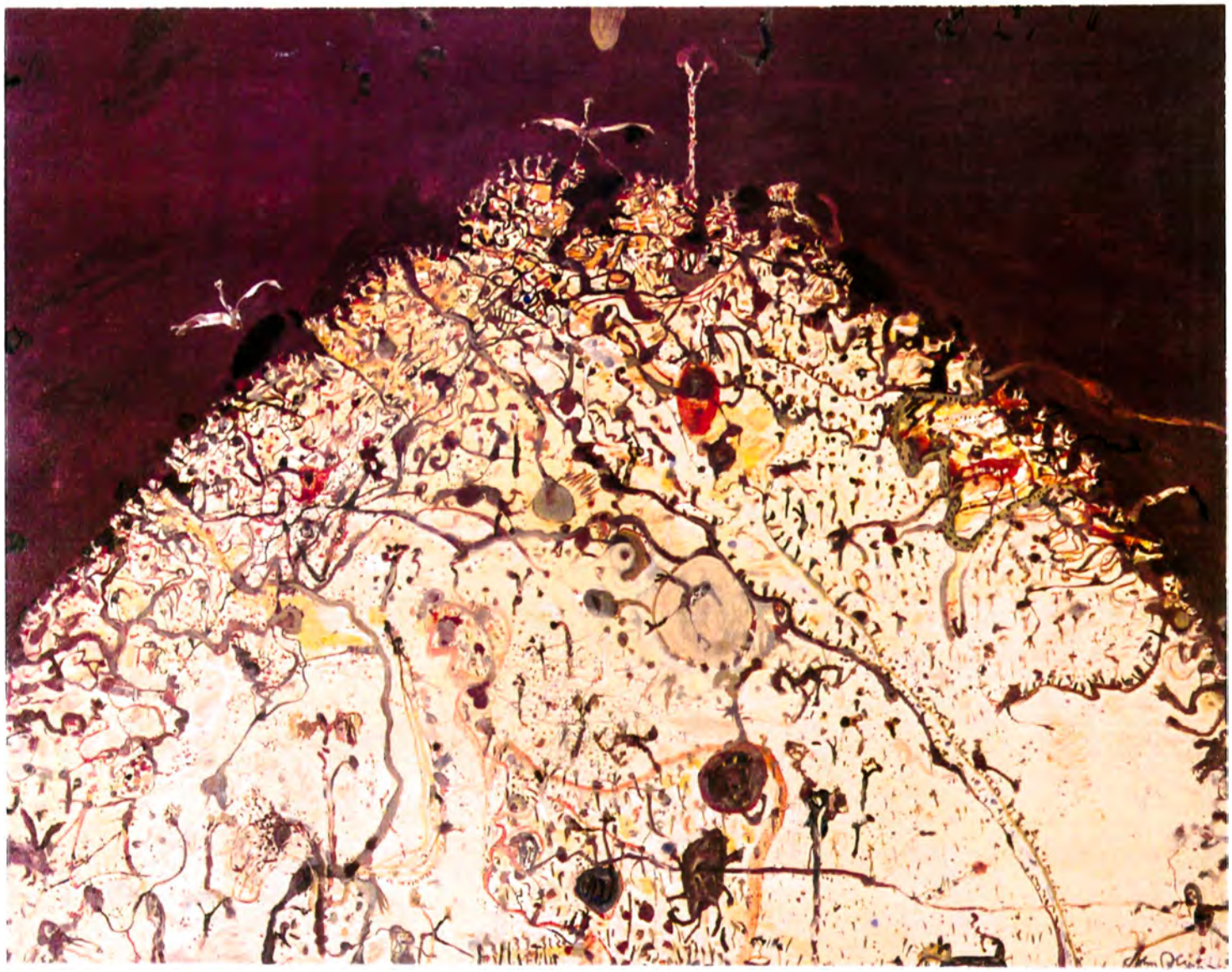
pl.85 *Coopers Creek in Flood* c.1975, 135 x 150cm
Christensen Fund Collection on loan to the Art Gallery of Western Australia

pl.86 *Dark Void* 1976,
oil on canvas, 138 x 152cm
Collection: National Bank of Australia

pl.87 *Goyder Channel* 1975, watercolour and gouache on torinoko paper, 190 x 100cm
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales

pl.88 *Arrival at the Void* 1975, watercolour on paper, 192 x 100cm
Private Collection

pl.89 *The Simpson Desert approaching the Void* 1976, oil on cavas, 151.5 x 136.4cm
Collection: Queensland University of Technology

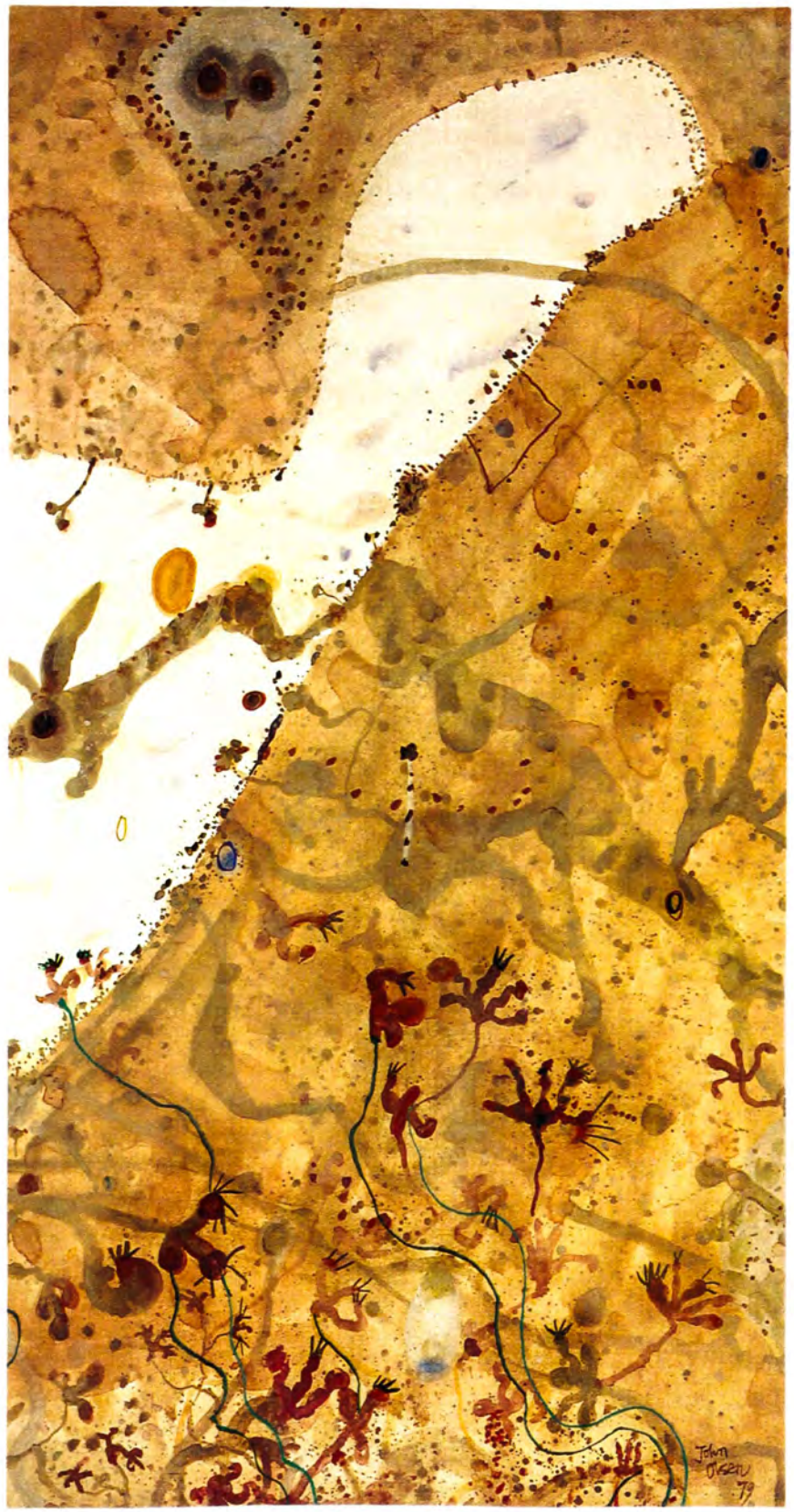


pl.90 *Channel Country in flood* 1976-77, oil on canvas, 168.2 x 215cm. Private collection

pl.91 *The Rookery* 1978,
watercolour and gouache on torinoko paper, 192 x 100cm
Collection: Australian Galleries

pl.92 *Dying Creek Bed* 1979,
watercolour and gouache on torinoko paper, 192 x 100cm
Collection: Edith Cowan University, Western Australia

pl.93 *Owls at Cooper's Creek* 1980,
watercolour and gouache on torinoko paper, 192 x 100cm



pl.94 *Rabbit and Kangaroo Paws* 1979, gouache on torinoko paper, 192 x 100cm
Collection: Amcor Ltd., Melbourne

pl.95 *Black Faced Monkeys, Mt.Kenya* 1989,
gouache and pastel on paper, 155 x 100cm
Collection: Nancy Kasprzycki

pl.96 *Giraffes, Mt. Kenya* (also known as *Giraffes & Balloon*) 1989,
gouache and pastel on torinoko paper, 192 x 100cm. Collection: Dr. Jolly Koh

pl.97 *Elephants* 1989, watercolour, gouache and pastel on torinoko paper, 155 x 100cm
Private collection

CHAPTER 11

THE CLARENDON YEARS

'A NEW PEOPLE IN AN ANTIQUE CONTINENT'

Terra Australis

Voyage within you, on the fabled ocean,
And you will find the Southern Continent,
Quiros' vision - the hidalgo heart
And mythical Australia, where reside
All things in their imagined counterpart.

It is your land of similes: the wattle
Scatters the pollen on the doubting heart...

James McAuley [397]

We are a new people on an antique continent, and we must do a lot more thinking and observing before we can piece this language together into the similes and metaphors which bring deeper understanding.

John Olsen [398]

Olsen's multi-layered response to the Australian landscape developed rapidly during the first half of the 1980s. At the time of his exhibition at Australian Galleries in October 1980, Jeffrey Makin wrote: 'Olsen's exhibition of recent paintings...is one of the rare shows that restores confidence in painting, regionalism and life. John Olsen at 52 has never looked better, so much for the myth that Australian painters burn out at 40'.[399]

Included in this exhibition were several nocturnal landscapes based in part on the environment around Wagga Wagga and a meditative state of mind. One of the most poetic is *Nightfall, When Wattle Stains the Doubting Heart* (pl.98), where a repeated moon drifts down and somnambulant, animistic shadows arch over the deep blue-green ground. In this weightless dream-like world, the hallucinatory quality is

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[397] See *My Country: Australian Poetry and Short Stories. Two Hundred Years*, Vol.2, selected and with an introduction by Leonie Kramer, Landsdowne Press, Sydney, 1985, p.461.
[398] John Olsen, *The Land Beyond Time: Paintings and Drawings by John Olsen*, exhibition catalogue, Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth, 1984, p.8.
[399] *Sun* (Melbourne), 29 October 1980.

enlivened by the vivid spots of brilliant yellow pollen. A related earlier work, *When Wattle Scatters the Pollen on the Doubting Heart*, included little honey-eating birds feeding off the pollen, but it is in this subsequent painting that Olsen combines a more introspective mood with a feeling for place. In both instances he was inspired by a poem called *Terra Australis* by the Australian poet, James McAuley, where a journey into the landscape is also a journey into the self: 'It is your land of similes: the wattle/ Scatters the pollen on the doubting heart'.[400]

In *Night Train and Owls* (pl.99) the train snakes over the old wooden viaduct stretching across the Murrumbidgee mudflats. Olsen's self-portrait, attached to an animalistic stick-like body, merges with the calligraphic notations of the plant forms; while another figure, at the edge of the work, becomes one with the river. The sense of a contemplative stillness comes through the muted colour, the spatial openness of the thinly painted landscape and the descending owls and moons. The repetition of forms derives from an unexpected source:

> I'd been to Egypt and was very fascinated with Egyptian art and their ability to repeat the same image in systems. In my own work I attempted to introduce a sequential feeling. Somehow the repetition adds to a strange form of other-worldliness.[401]

In July 1981 John Olsen and Noela Hjorth moved to the hamlet of Clarendon in South Australia, about 30 kilometres outside Adelaide, where they had purchased a beautiful stone manse, The Old Rectory, built in 1850. They had been alerted to the place by the artist David Dridan, who managed a small gallery at the Old Clarendon Winery. From the start Olsen recognised that this environment, characterised by voluptuous rolling hills and a village atmosphere, would have a considerable impact on his work:

> This will mark a new period in my life and work. Our house is like an eagle's nest perched over the village...opposite is a particularly steep hill that has sheep climbing up it, clusters of crows flying up and down, cockatoos white and splendid soaring past, clouds seem on eye level, & sheeps tracks make fascinating meanders over the hill's surface.[402]

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400 *My Country: Australian Poetry and Short Stories*, op.cit., p.461.
401 Olsen, interview with the author.
402 John Olsen, Clarendon journal.

Olsen's studio was the old Institute Building, constructed in 1853, nestling in the valley on the one main street of the town which cut through the hilly landscape. It was in the quite spacious main front room of this historic building that he was to produce most of his work over the following seven years. Here he would recreate the Clarendon landscape, the seasonal changes and the country-village environment in painting after painting. Initially, however, there was a process of assimilation: 'I will try and get the nouns right first and then add the adjectives and then the verbs, then I might be able to join the metaphors'.

During the first eighteen months after their arrival, Olsen's investigations of the landscape in his work were directed primarily to the broader context of the South Australian landscape and his journey to North-West Australia. He made frequent visits to the coastal regions of South Australia, particularly the Fleurieu Peninsula, Goolwa and Lake Alexandrina where the Murray river meets the sea. Olsen had first visited Goolwa in 1977 to conduct an art class there, and between 1982 and 1987 he explored the region more closely. He often made a number of rapid sketches from the air and from the ground, which were transformed in his studio into oil paintings.

The drawings were not preliminary studies in the traditional sense. After making brief notations he would, for example, do exploratory brush drawings, tracing the meandering patterns and voluptuous lines of eddying rivers and streams merging, coagulating and breaking away; experimenting all the while with the movement of the gouache or watercolour over the paper. 'I've come to love working with a big brush sloppy thick & thin marks. Its very catch as catch can, my failure rate is about 80% & I don't care its such a lovely adventure.'[403] In this free, investigative way, he was discovering an array of ideas for paintings from one stage to the next. It was a process from which he would finally distil unity from diversity.

Compared with the evanescent appearance of many of his oils over the previous few years, works such as *River in Flood and Blind Bird* (pl.100), *Tidal Estuary* (pl.101) and *Fleurieu Peninsula* reveal the resurgence of a more obvious, active involvement in the painting process itself, where calligraphic lines are not only inflexions but direct physical components of landscape. The compositional inventiveness is evident in the way Olsen pushes the bulk of the landforms to the upper portions of these works. He often combines the broadly painted areas with an acute precision of drawing, as in *Tidal Estuary*, where the sinuous, hybrid land-animal protuberances slice into the creamy white ground. In *River in Flood and Blind Bird*, meandering

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403 ibid.

lines, encrusted with scrubby bushes, descend and trace the odd angles and curling paths of the fretted landscape entering the river.

Many of Olsen's landscape paintings of the 1980s recall the ideas expressed in the works of the early 1960s: of the landscape as a living pulsing organism suggestive of animalistic shapes and biological forms; of landscape not as a static factor but as process, not only seen but felt.

> The eye is a rather dull instrument but it is the spiritual urge that will reveal the essence. And whilst I am looking at the object and I'm drawing the object, I'm really empathising with the object. I'm endeavouring to become the object. That's the essence of really painting and drawing – that the landscape is not stationary...And so therefore I might look at the river but I am also endeavouring to find the extensions from the river.

Olsen had long felt a deep respect for the Aboriginal understanding of the land not as real estate, 'but animated by spirits that are alive and vital...that the river was more than a river, a river might have the snake god in it, or a rock might contain the spirit of a kangaroo'.[404] He recognised that it was difficult for European Australians to assimilate Aboriginal art and did not attempt to appropriate their images but believed that there should be some acknowledgment of their understandings. 'I couldn't accept that a culture which had been here for forty thousand years didn't have something to tell us about the sort of country we live in.'[405]

After his Dionysian years in Sydney, Olsen had also increasingly felt the need to look beyond the metropolitan centres to the regional areas and the interior in an attempt to develop a more comprehensive feeling for the country. Recalling A.D. Hope's lines 'her five cities, like five teeming sores.../pullulating/ Timidly on the edge of alien shores',[406] Olsen had begun to conceive of the majority of the Australian population as 'saucer dwellers'.

> Australians lead a saucer-like existence perched on the edge of their unruly continent & their lives are like exotic [orchids] which have no relationship to the wilderness stretching from rim [to] rim. They

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[404] John Olsen, interview with the author, *The Jack Manton Prize* video, Queensland Art Gallery, 1987.
[405] John Olsen, *In Search of the Open Country 1961 - 1986*, Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, 1986, p.10.
[406] *Australian Poetry and Short Stories*, op.cit., p.222.

> wear the profile for the vast unconscious to which some unknown genius gave the marvellously evocative name of the Never Never.[407]

Since Olsen's first visits to the interior in the 1970s he had become fascinated by the role that the desert played in the minds and work of Australian artists and in 1980–81 had written a book on the subject with Sandra McGrath.[408] This work traced a range of viewpoints, from nineteenth-century explorers and artists like S.T. Gill, to Hans Heysen in the 1920s, to depictions by Drysdale and Nolan of the arid landscape in the 1940s and subsequent evocations by Rees, Williams, Coburn, Juniper, Daws, Wolseley and Storrier. Olsen's own interpretations of the interior at Lake Eyre had introduced a mood of optimism, simultaneously incorporating his characteristic vitality with a new-found serenity in his work.

In 1982 John Olsen was able to further expand his insights into the desert regions of the country and build on the tradition which preceded him, on a journey to the north-west of Western Australia. Despite the many artists who had looked to the desert in their work, particularly since the 1940s, Olsen recognised that, for European Australians, this was only a very recent tradition, compared with the centuries of civilisations that had passed over China, India and Europe and with the profound understanding of the land in Australia by Aboriginal people. For him, the journey to the North-West represented part of a gradual process of attempting to 'decipher a few more hieroglyphics' of a very ancient land:

> How strange it is that Europeans should have thought of Australia as part of the 'new world'...The complex nomadic people, whose silent feet had trodden the vast landscape for some 35,000 years, had nothing in common with the invaders from a much newer civilisation. The settlers felt there should be some point of reconciliation between what they found here & their own experience of the world, but it was as though they were struggling to learn a new language. We are a new people in an antique continent, & we must do a lot more thinking & observing before we can piece this language together into the similes & metaphors which bring deeper understanding.[409]

Olsen departed on the journey to the North-West in August 1982. This major expedition, sponsored by the Christensen Fund, aimed to bring a multifaceted understanding of a region occupying a third of the continent, by sending a group of

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[407] Olsen, *The Land Beyond Time*, op.cit., p.8.
[408] Sandra McGrath & John Olsen, *The Artist and the Desert*, Bay Books, Sydney and London, 1981.
[409] Olsen, *The Land Beyond Time*, op.cit., pp.7 - 8.

people with different talents into some of the remote and lesser known areas, 'collectively to absorb...and then separately to set down by paintings, poetry and prose a distillation...for the rest of us'.[410] The participants included Olsen, Dame Mary Durack (historian and author), Geoffrey Dutton (poet and author), Vincent Serventy (natural scientist) and Alex Bortignon (photographer and project manager).

While the journey itself spanned a ten-week period, the various contributions, including a large group of paintings and drawings by Olsen, were brought together over fifteen months, culminating in a lavish publication, *The Land Beyond Time*, which extensively documented the expedition and the interaction between the participants. Olsen's works of this period are among his best known and, as part of the Christensen Fund Collection, later travelled to many State and Regional galleries around the country.

The journey covered a staggering distance of 18,500 kilometres by land and 11,500 kilometres in helicopters and light aircraft, departing from Geraldton, travelling through the Pilbara, up to the Prince Regent River in the north and later returning to the Bungle Bungle Ranges. The group also visited Aboriginal campsites and missions; mines and outback stations.

The information provided by Olsen's travelling companions placed him in a favourable position for developing a layered understanding of the region and its population. At the same time, one of the most important aspects of the journey was the willingness of the participants to be open to new discoveries or, as Geoffrey Dutton succinctly put it, 'to remain vulnerable, to surrender to the demands which the north-west makes on anyone who travels there'.[411]

John Olsen made numerous sketches, drawings and written notations in the course of their travels, building up a diverse range of impressions. Throughout their travels, he was continually enraptured by the fluctuating patterns seen from the air. Most of the sketches of the landscape were quite free and accompanied by information denoting the spacing of the shrubs, the variations in their dimensions and the diverse colourations. From these accumulated responses, Olsen was faced with the task of developing them into major oils and further works on paper in his studio; a task which would preoccupy him from November 1982 and at intervals throughout the following year.

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410 ibid., Introduction by Allen Christensen, p.4.
411 Geoffrey Dutton, *The Land Beyond Time* (with contributions by John Olsen, Mary Durack, Geoffrey Dutton, Vincent Serventy and Alex Bortignon) MacMillan, Melbourne, 1984, p.12.

His two major concerns in the large oils were to attain a sense of the timeless quality and enormity of the landscape. In the course of the journey he noted that he was inclined to experiment with underpainting or even glazing, 'a method that gives an illusive and aged vision to the scene'. Olsen also commented:

> The whole landscape seems to sprawl endlessly – conventional European compositional devices based on geometrical patterns and triangles (vide Leonardo), ovals and circles would be totally inadequate to this landscape. I am inclined to the Taoist solution, i.e. to infer a world without end, a frame put across this endless flux and give the impression that the artist is part of that.[412]

In *Pilbara Train* (pl.102), the earth has become a mass of Heraclitean, molten lava, while the train snaking over it becomes synonymous with the scars left by erosion. The russet-orange ground is applied in layers and glazes which slip and slide over each other, suggesting both the flatness and the layering of the weathered land. Olsen frequently reduces the forms of modern technology and transport, as in *Spinifex and Aeroplane* where the minute yellow plane is barely noticeable in the engulfing spaces, counteracted by a mass of curling, dusty olive-green spinifex, annotated with characteristic vitality.

In their aerial perspective and speckled notations, some of Olsen's works bear comparison with Fred Williams's *Pilbara* series.[413] However, while he certainly admired Williams's feeling for paint and compositional structure, close inspection of *The Land Beyond Time* paintings also reveals continuing differences in their approaches; only in *Ebb Tide, Prince Regent River* is there any real similarity.[414] Compared to Williams's sparse, steady and more consistent views of the landscape, Olsen's work is generally more diverse in its metaphorical associations, more irrational and therefore more unpredictable. For him, the desert landscape could be a swirling mass of colour embodying animistic forms; it could also be a still life or replete with animal and human associations.

After Olsen's initial experiences of the landscapes of the interior at Lake Eyre, his responses to the North-West revealed new associations; finding it at various times exhilarating, beautiful, harsh and uncompromising:

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412 ibid., p.184.
413 See James Mollison, *A Singular Vision: The Art of Fred Williams*, Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1989.
414 Also noted by Phyllis Woolcock, *Courier Mail* (Brisbane), 28 November 1984.

> Sometimes the landscape seemed so totally inimical to man that it was like a snarling animal. When we entered the gorges of the Prince Regent River or flew over the massive rock faces of that country, or stood on the beach of Careening Bay between the sea & the tangled wilderness of rock & scrub, one felt that technology was only a frail shield against disaster.[415]

In certain instances, Olsen found commonalities with the desert country of the North-West and the dry regions of the Mallee district he had visited earlier in the year.[416] This was the case with *Dry creek bed*, where the creek bed viewed from above has become the imprint of some strange, giant creature stretched across the parched land; flatly painted but animated by vigorous coiling brushmarks. Again the perspective is tilted to reveal a thin strip of iridescent blue sky. This work bears a curious analogy with a dream Olsen had over two decades earlier, when he was still attempting to discover 'a new kind of figuration'. It was expressed in a few lines of a poem he never finished: 'It came to me like a rocket fantasy;/ I saw an animal clothed in dry grass...although at present I can barely see the horizon'. Since the mid-1950s Olsen had been reading the poetry of W.B. Yeats, and in 1989 he repeated the same motif of an animalistic shape over the landscape in a work called *The Second Coming*, after a poem of the same title by Yeats.

> *The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out*
> *When a vast image out of 'Spiritus Mundi'*
> *Troubles my sight: somewhere in the sands of the desert*
> *A shape with lion body and head of a man,*
> *A gaze as blank and pitiless as the sun,*
> *Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it*
> *Reel shadows of indignant desert birds.*[417]

Compared with the serene Lake Eyre oils, Olsen's large paintings in *The Land Beyond Time* series are often tougher, bolder in brushwork and more earthy in their colouration. There are, however, some surprises, such as the idiosyncratic *Still life influenced by the Desert* (pl.104) in which the subtle, delicately outlined still life objects float over the sensuous, creamy ground (which has also become a table) silhouetted against the dark surround. In the less resolved oils one has the sense of the artist's struggle to reconcile the detachment he occasionally felt in the face of the

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415 Olsen, *The Land Beyond Time*, op.cit., p.10.

416 Olsen's painting *Dry Creek Bed*, which forms part of The Land Beyond Time series, was evidently started prior to the journey to Western Australia, after a visit to the Mallee country. Listed in the catalogue of Olsen's exhibition, Australian Galleries, July 1982.

417 See *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, Third Edition, W.W.Norton & Company Inc., New York and London, 1983, p.883.

immensity of the land and the difficulty of translating his initial impressions into the finished paintings. But in the best of them he extends our perceptions of the desert landscape through his often daring and imaginative response.

Some of the most memorable works in the series are also the smallest – watercolours, gouaches and brush drawings. The eerie magic of the place is revealed in *Camel and Bungle Bungle Ranges* and the merging of wildlife with the environment is again evoked in *Jacanas and Ord in the Wet Season* and in the delicate *Honeyeater and Flower.*

Olsen also did many drawings of Aboriginal people. These include several small ink and watercolour studies in his sketchbooks such as *Man and Dog, Jigalong* and *Aboriginal carrying his brother over bindieyes* where, with a few strokes of the brush, he succinctly conveys the connection of the people with each other and the landscape. He continued on this theme soon after his return to his studio. His empathetic response in the process of working filtered through the brush drawings of Aboriginal children writing and drawing, where the bold simplicity of the curvilinear forms and his sensitivity to the actions of his subjects, convey a beautiful sense of concentration.

Olsen made note in his journals of the wide-ranging Aboriginal communities his group encountered. His most enduring memories were of the complete sense of ease that so many of the people retained with the land; that, in spite of the adverse effects of white settlement, many were still able to maintain their links with the distant past.

> Outside the fortresses of the mining towns we saw groups of Aborigines drifting across the ocean of spinifex, with their dark heads punctuating the ice-blue sky, following the same tracks of the hunter-gatherer as their Dreamtime ancestors.

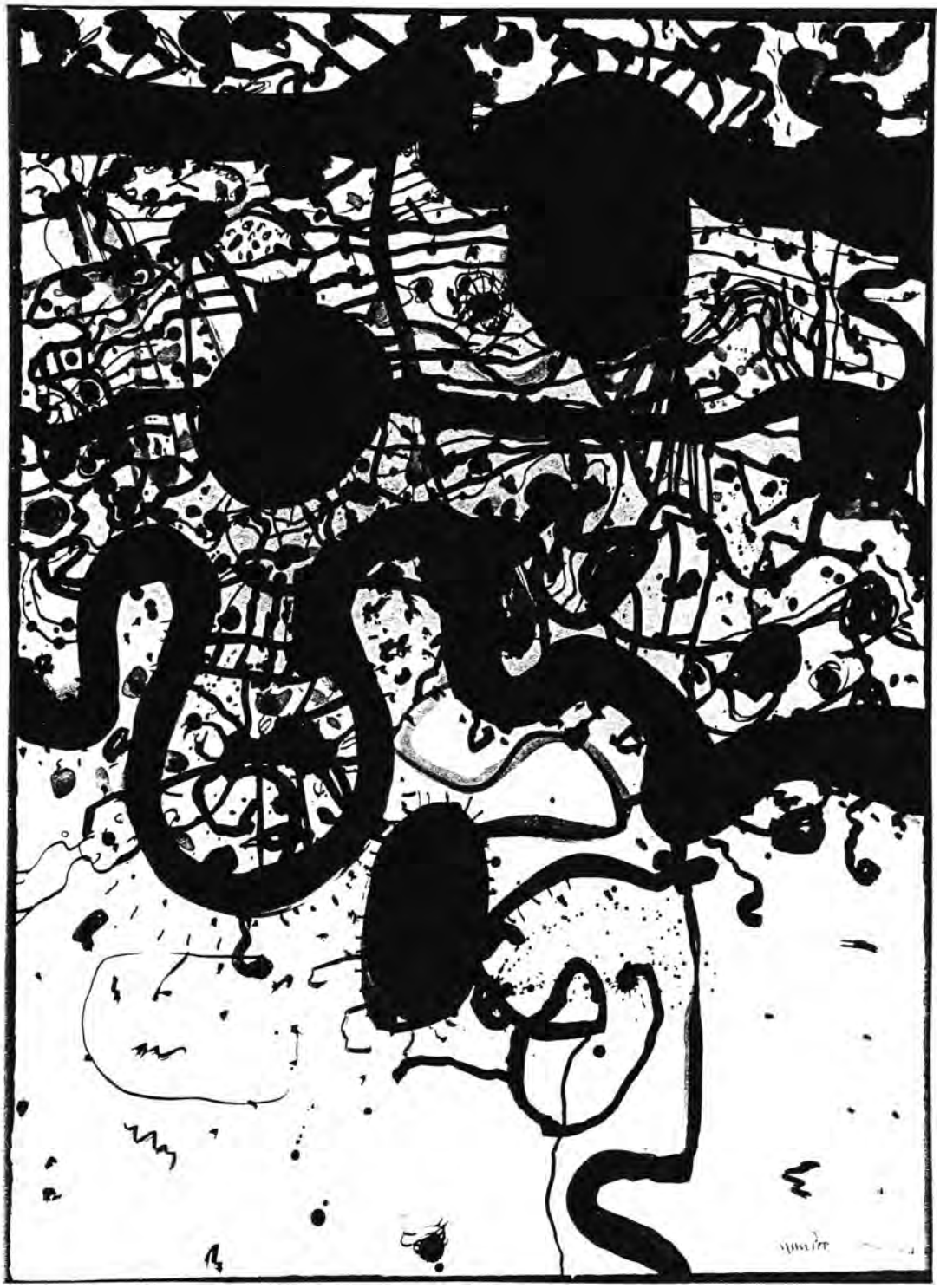


fig.67 *Mundoo* 1987, gouache on paper, 77 x 56cm. Private Collection

fig.68 *Man and Dog, Jigalong* 1982,
gouache and wash on paper, 25.8 x 12.5cm
Collection: The Christensen Fund

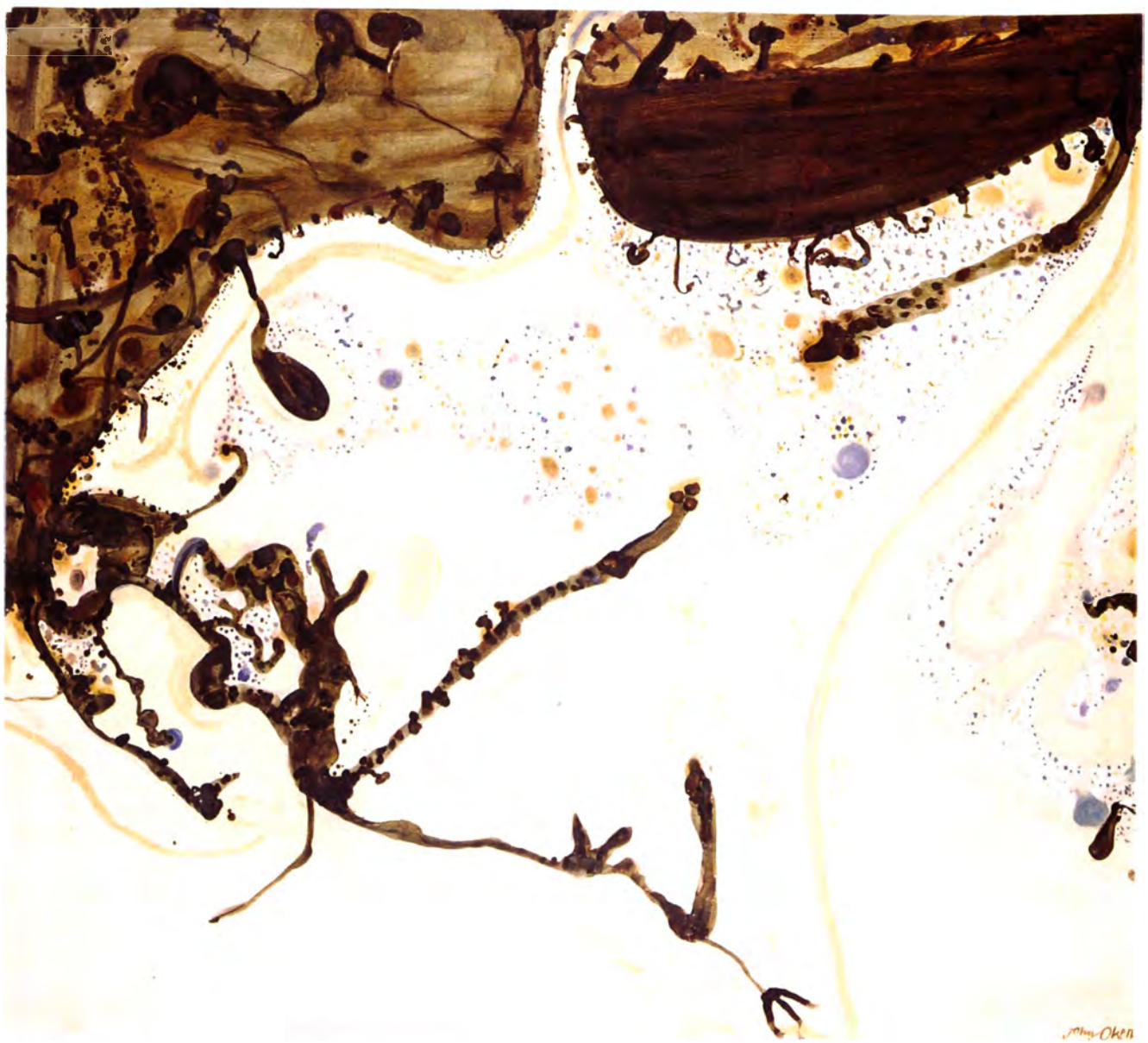
fig.69 *Aboriginal carrying his brother over Binideyes* 1982,
ink, pastel, gouache and wash on paper, 32.3 x 23.5cm
Collection: The Christensen Fund

fig.70 *Aboriginal Child Drawing* 1982,
pastel and gouache on paper, 55.3 x 37.5cm
Collection: The Christensen Fund

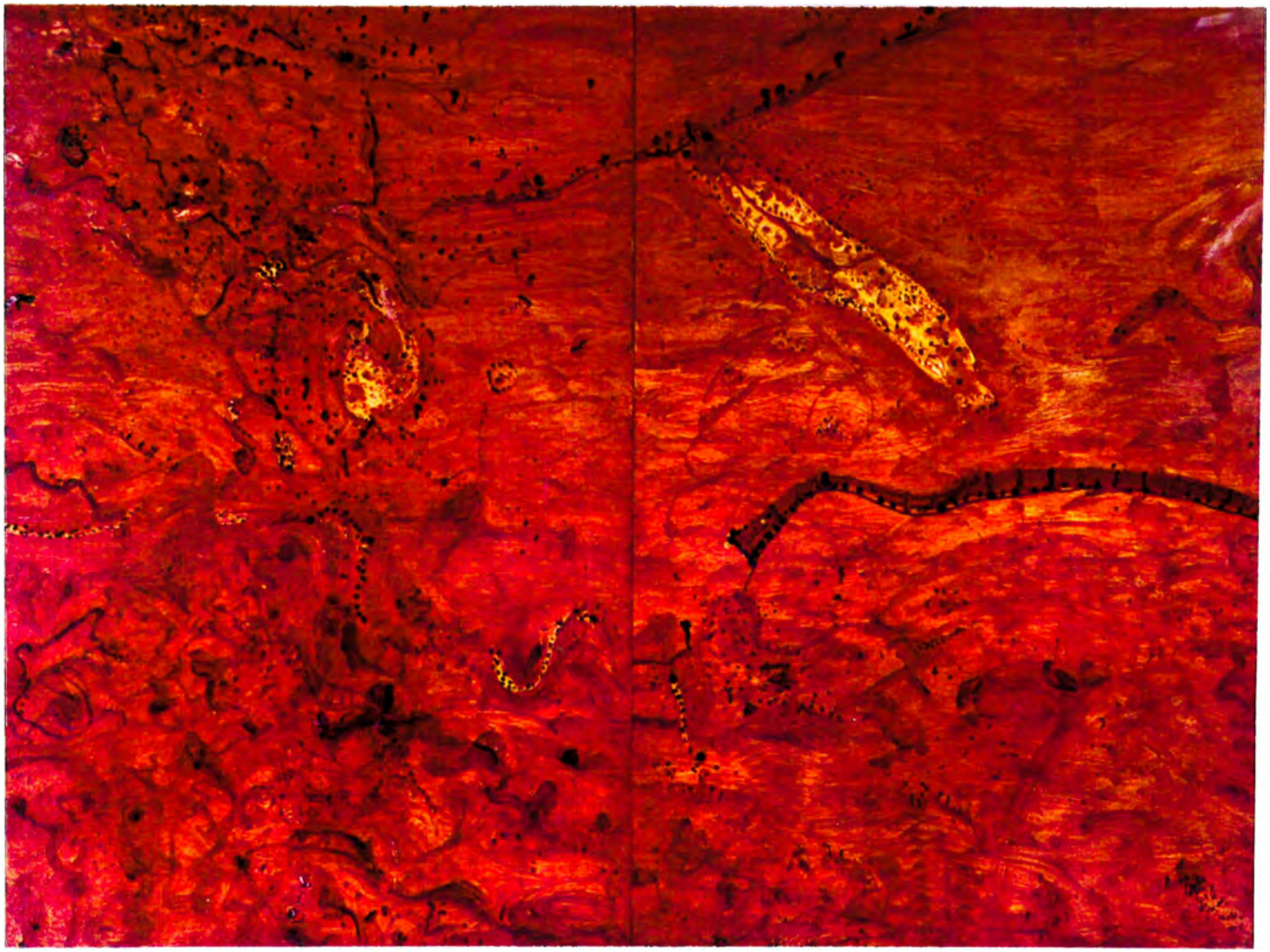
pl.98 *Nightfall, When Wattle Stains the Doubting Heart* 1980, oil on canvas, 167 x 159cm
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales

pl.99 *Night Train and Owls* 1980, oil on canvas, 167 x 159cm
Private collection

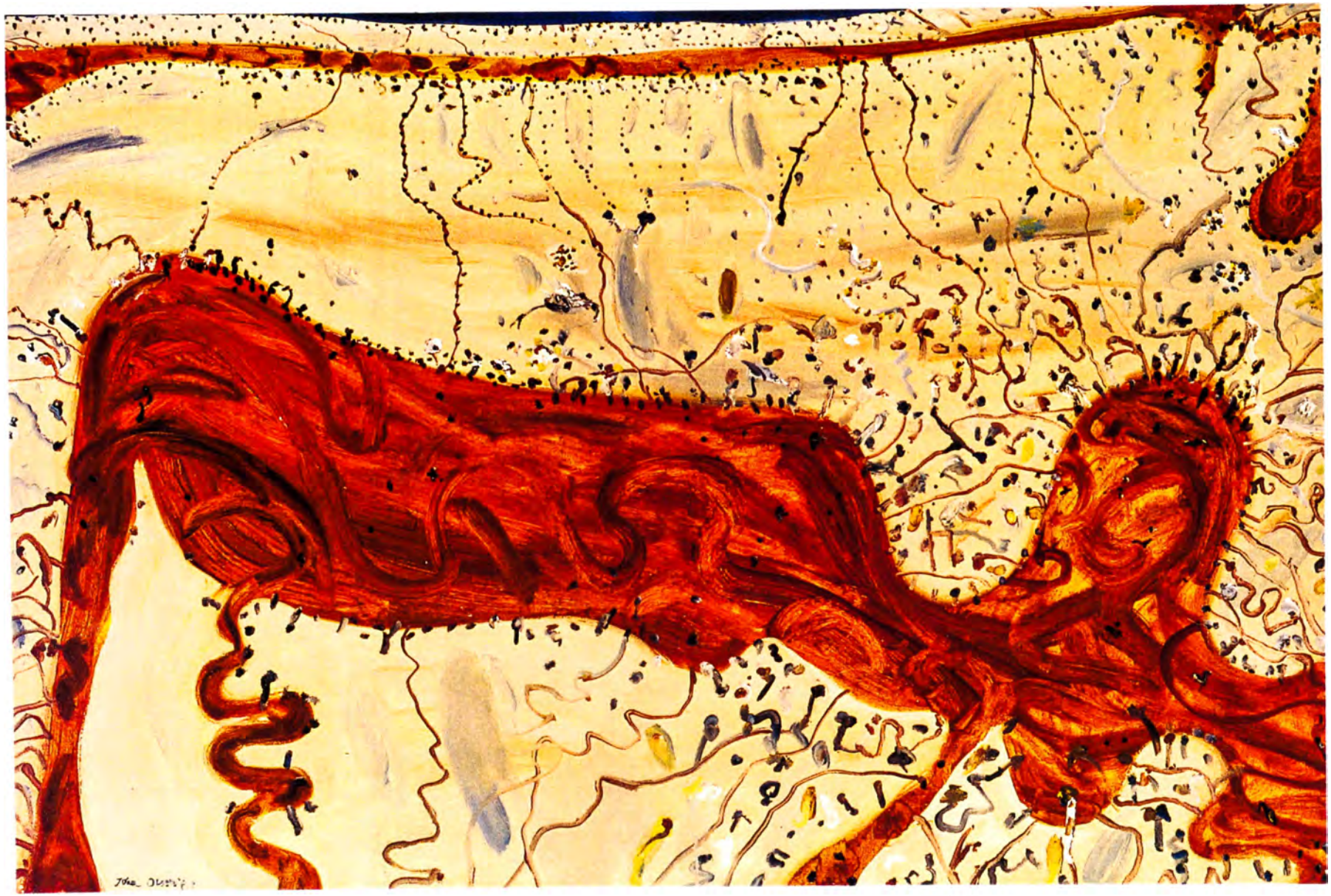
pl.100 ***River in Flood and Blind Bird*** 1982, oil on canvas, 165 x 180cm
Private collection



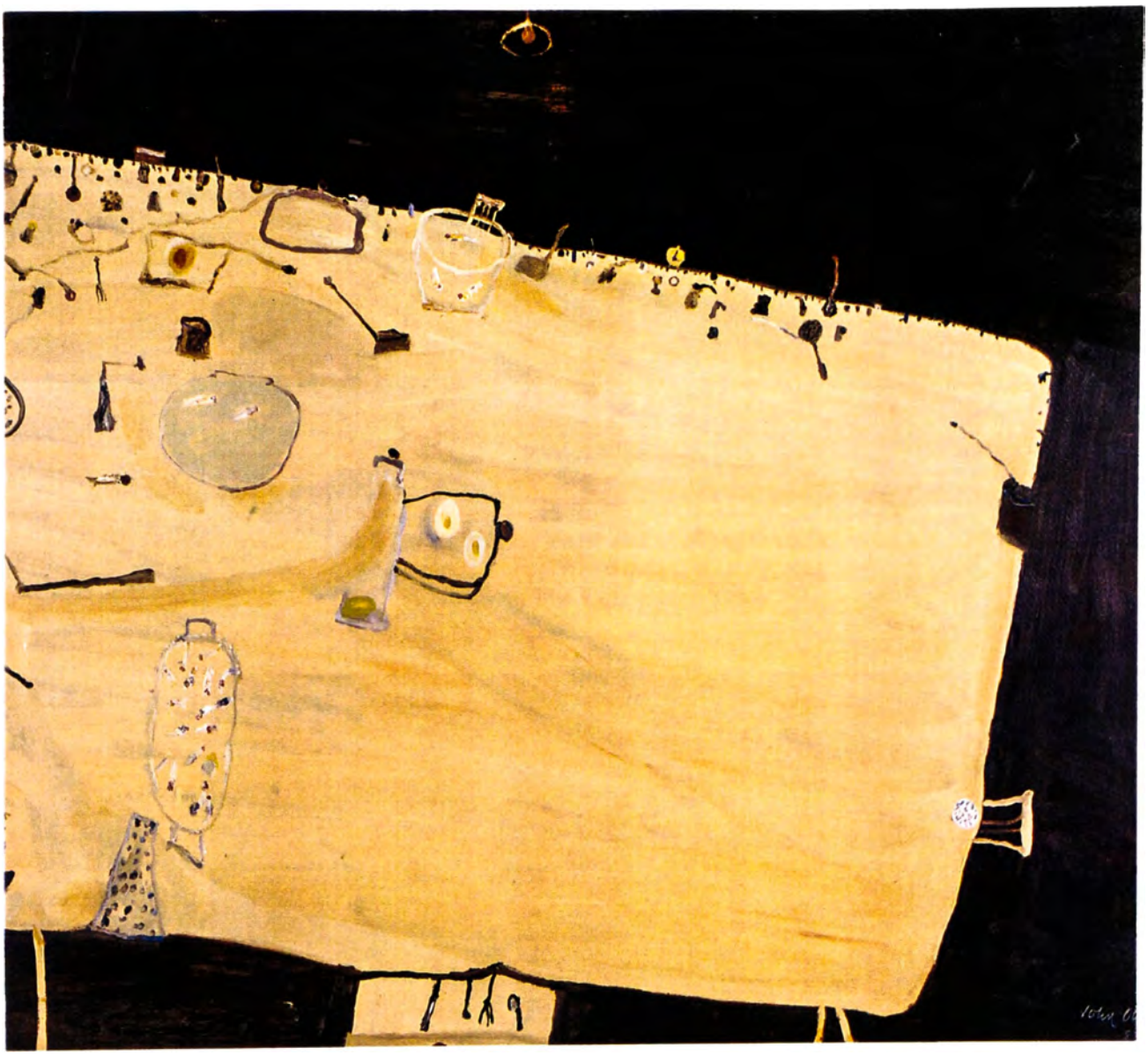
pl.101 *Tidal Estuary* 1982, oil on canvas, 162 x 180cm
Collection: State Bank of Victoria



pl.102 *Pilbara Train* 1982 (diptych), oil on hardboard, 183 x 244cm. Collection: The Christensen Fund

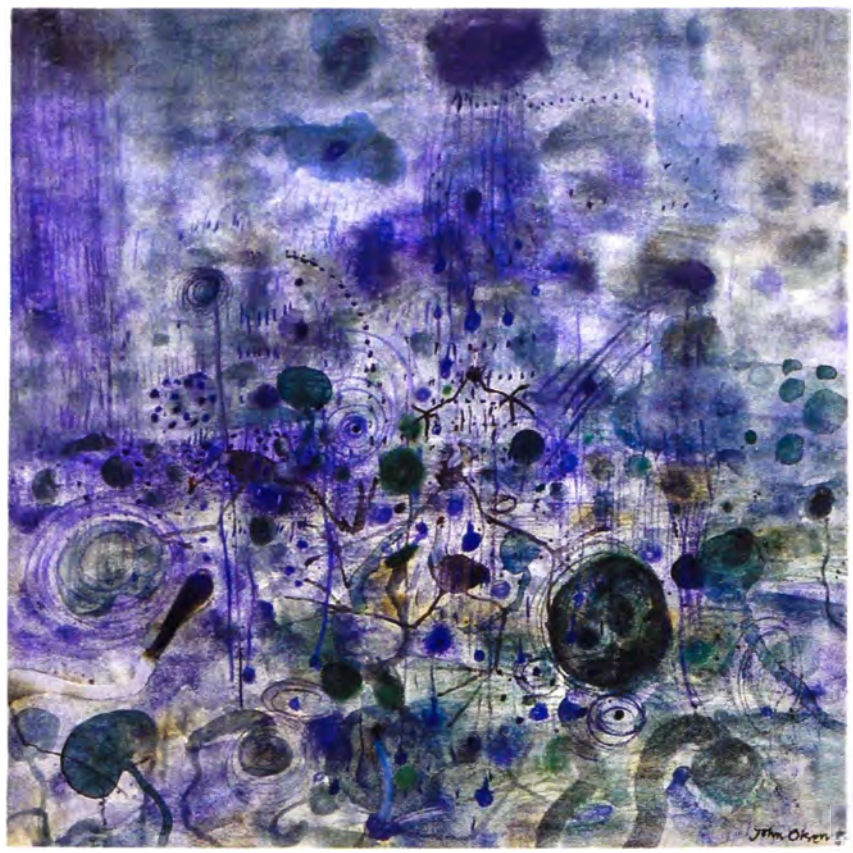


pl.103 *Dry creek bed* 1982, oil on canvas, 121.8 x 182.5cm. Collection: The Christensen Fund



pl.104 *Still life influenced by the Desert*, 1982, oil on canvas, 134 x 149.5cm
Collection: The Christensen Fund

pl.105 *Camel and Bungle Bungle Ranges* 1983,
watercolour and pastel on paper, 80 x 79.2cm
Collection: The Christensen Fund



pl.106 *Jacanas and Ord in the Wet Season* 1983,
watercolour and pastel on paper, 81.2 x 80.5cm
Collection: The Christensen Fund

'AIX–EN-CLARENDON'

I want to live in communion with Nature. I want to eat the vegetables from my garden, the oil from my olive trees, to suck the fresh eggs of my chickens, to get drunk on the wine of my vines, and as far as possible to eat the bread I make with my wheat.

Jean de Florette.[418]

To dream your life in order to live it.[419]

The seven years Olsen spent in the hamlet of Clarendon saw a resurgence of confidence in his oil paintings, comparable to his work of the 1960s. This emerged not as an even progression but through his ongoing willingness to take risks and experiment, to absorb the environment in which he lived, to consolidate the lessons of the past and to enlarge his thematic concerns. The latter included: the regional landscape, the sea, still life, wildlife, opera, memories of Spain revisited and the idiosyncrasies of human nature and experience.

Olsen's decision to live in the country in South Australia was motivated by the idyllic landscape and atmosphere of the place, which he affectionately referred to as 'Aix-en-Clarendon', the need to be away from the distractions of city life, and the opportunity to consolidate past experience:

> I think we live in cities when we are young people; we make our reputations and battle with meaning...the exchange of ideas. You make friendships that will last all your life and enemies as well. It is a very necessary experience because a city is a raiding station of communication and ideas...I think there is another period of your life when you go away to the country because you come to the point when you realise that nothing can be done for you any more; that you have to grapple with what you understand...I think we become mature when we accept our limitations. You can only do that after having lots of experience.[420]

Clarendon was both close enough to Adelaide to provide access to occasional visitors and city amenities, and insular and far enough away to provide him with a sense of isolation in his work. It was also a place where Olsen's romantic, poetic imagination could come alive. Not since Watsons Bay had he found a place so

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418 Marcel Pagnol, *Jean de Florette & Manon of the Springs*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1988, p.75.
419 Quote from Henry Miller noted in Olsen's journal 1982.
420 Interview with the author, *The Jack Manton Prize* video, op.cit.

conducive to the way in which he wanted to live and work; where he could evolve a sense of the 'total environment' and recreate his dream of a Mediterranean way of life. This was made possible through the enclosed, hermetic atmosphere of the place. From the balcony of the house he could see the small village in the main street below, hills studded with olive groves, almond and fruit trees, as well as animal life. He delighted in the eggs laid by chickens with their bright yellow yolks and the wide-ranging herb and vegetable garden which, with the help of a gardener, he had reconstructed according to the terraced landscapes he had observed as a young artist in the village of Deya in Spain many years before. Although Olsen's 'glimpse of paradise' in Clarendon was only part of the story, his intense feeling for the place fuelled many beautiful paintings.

For Olsen, love, life, art and taking risks are inextricably intertwined in this period. His relationship with Noela Hjorth during these years was volatile, romantic and difficult. Both complex personalities, there were the inevitable tensions between two artists living together. Periods of equilibrium became progressively interspersed by intense highs and lows. While layered with broader implications, the polarities of Olsen's experience in Clarendon, between the burgeoning world of life and love and his subsequent sense of frustration and despair, were reflected in two major paintings: *Where the bee sucks,there suck I* (pl.109) and *El Delor* (pl.125).

During the early 1980s, Olsen painted several works loosely based around the interwoven themes of still life, landscape, people and the cumulative nature of the Spanish paella and other dishes. Among the most striking were a small, predominantly black and white drawing, *Paella* (fig.71), the sparse, sensitive *Still life influenced by the Desert* (pl.104) and *Duck à l'Orange* (pl.107). These works provide a connecting thread with the food and kitchen paintings of the 1960s.

In *Duck à l'Orange*, Olsen combines imaginative daring with a sure sense of control in the handling of the paint and in the dramatic placement of the creamy table against the dark, velvety black ground. Looping calligraphic lines trace paths around a wide array of figurative images, at times reminiscent of the decorative sensuality of Bonnard but given a capricious edge by the face looking at the duck, the cleaver and the dog with bared teeth entering from the lower right. As in many of his paintings, it is the fusion of a sound knowledge of painting and drawing with the inventive, irrational, risk-taking factors that provides the work with its vital dimension.

Olsen established a regular working routine in Clarendon, going to his studio at about 9.00 a.m., stopping on the way for coffee at the general store, working

through until about 4.30 p.m., and sometimes dropping in to the local pub at the end of the day. Before leaving the house in the morning he would often read and, as in previous years, was frequently immersed in poetry. Along with his perennial fascination with Gerard Manley Hopkins and Dylan Thomas, he was also reading Philip Larkin, Louis MacNeice, William Carlos Williams and Hart Crane. 'When I think upon the list', he wrote, 'I suppose they are all poets who have attempted to give a natural voice – almost conversational...I suppose I like this in painting as well'.[421] On his studio wall he inscribed a poem by MacNeice called *Snow*:

> *The world is crazier and more of it than we think,*
> *Incorrigibly plural. I peel and portion*
> *A tangerine and spit the pips and feel*
> *The drunkenness of things being various.*[422]

Compared with Olsen's desert landscapes, his paintings of the local Clarendon environment are generally characterised by a much greater sense of intimacy and familiarity. He was constantly inspired by the large hill facing the house. 'It is God on one of his good geometry days. It is a fantastically beautiful hill and at its base it is very vertical, very steep and gouged into it are these tracks and burnt grass and it is something very rare.' He made a number of free sketchy pastel drawings of the hill in his journal, aiming to capture its intrinsic and atmospheric qualities.

On 15 October 1983 Olsen noted: 'I am working on big pictures – the poetry is rekindled. One painting 6' x 6' in golden yellow releases me which I shall call "Golden Summer"'. This became *Golden Summer, Clarendon* (pl.108), one of his most lyrical and ecstatic works. Here the hill has become barely perceptible as earth meets sky; the whole appears soluble and floating, suffused with a honey-coloured glow. While there are signs of his earlier linear calligraphy, this has generally given way to the sheer sensuality of oil paint. There is a tangible sense of the artist's immersion in the painting process as the paint is applied first with big brushes wet into wet, thinly veiled layer upon layer and subsequently flicked with a smaller brush, spattered and applied directly from the tube. Subsumed within the heat haze are numerous small, precise images of birds, trees and apples. *Golden Summer, Clarendon* incorporates the Zen notion of a state of being and the filtering of close observation through feeling and the impulse of intuition.

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421 Letter from Olsen to the author, 24 July 1987.

422 See *The Oxford Library of English Poetry*, chosen and edited by John Wain, Oxford University press, Oxford, 1986, p.381.

John Olsen working in his Clarendon studio on *Golden Summer, Clarendon*,
with *Fleurieu Peninsula* in the background.
(Original photograph by Jan Dalman)

This was the first of a group of three works that Olsen would refer to as his 'Clarendon Season' series, of which he painted summer, autumn and spring. Although he noted that he had to leave Clarendon before he finished the series, it is also possible that winter, when the hills turn green (a colour Olsen generally steered away from in his landscapes) was also the most difficult to conceive.

For two decades Olsen had been outside the so-called avant-garde of Australian art. While he was painting these Clarendon works he was conscious of how contrary they appeared to contemporary, fashionable trends and also noted his omission from survey exhibitions of Australian art of the 1970s. 'It seems à la mode is expressionism', he wrote in his journal. '...What a curious situation to be in: hated by the Field people of the late 60's and 70's by not being structural and abstract American enough, and as things seem to happen, as the pendulum swings back not expressionist and gloomy enough. Ah! my wicked lyric nature!'

In the 'high-tech' materialist society of Australia in the 1980s, dominated by mass media, sophisticated gadgets, computers, videos and the rest, Olsen perceived an urgent need not to lose touch with the natural world, with a sense of poetry and the inner world of imagination. He also felt deeply disillusioned with late modernism and the ever-increasing tendency towards intellectual posturing and esoteric jargon that had little to do with the mainstream of an artistic tradition. Although Olsen was continually inventing and reinventing the world in his art, he was conscious of his linkages with the rich tradition of the past and felt frustrated by the current obsession for the novel, the ephemeral and the sensational.

> How important it is in this ocean of slop to remember 'The Night Watch', Monet's 'Waterlilies'...Bonnard's 'Nude in a Bath'. It is not as though one would expect to be the same...[But] painting is such a beautiful thing [that] I refuse to believe that a great aesthetic can be realised by a deliberate attempt at tastelessness...How a thing is said is what it is, as Wilde put it, there is no such thing as an obscene novel, only a badly written one.

Although Olsen was intolerant of the loss of standards in art, he did support younger artists who, he felt, transcended the superficiality of much of what he saw. Hossein Valamanesh he believed to be the 'best young artist in Adelaide'; his sculptural installations, he noted, 'would not have shamed a desert nomad'. Later he admired Mike Parr's penetrating self-portraits which reveal a psychic intensity and the quality of his drawing skills.

At the end of December 1983, Olsen wrote in his journal: 'Xmas spent quietly in Clarendon. I cooked Spanish Gaspacho and Canard l'orange...A beautiful day. / 26th boxing day. Worked down in the studio glazing, varnishing and priming boards – not much thought required – a bird gives a punctuation mark occasionally and a summer wind gives the stone studio a whistle'.

By 12 January 1984 he was working on two large paintings which he noted were respectively based on two poems: his long-term favourite, Gerard Manley Hopkins's *Spring*, and Dylan Thomas's *The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower*. Both paintings went through transitional stages, with the former becoming known as *Clarendon Spring, Make Sure the Sun Wipes its Feet* (pl.110) and the latter, *Where the bee sucks, there suck I*(pl.109). This was not altogether unusual in Olsen's work. Often a particular poem would suggest a mood or feeling, providing the starting point for a work that would simultaneously overlap with his impressions of the surrounding environment. As the painting progressed in an additive way he would discover new associations building on and transforming his original themes, in accordance with the formal structure of the work itself. While, on the one hand, this provides a distracting array of concerns, the linkages and pattern of ideas are not difficult to trace.

Where the bee sucks, there suck I is a dazzling cornucopia; a fecund world where the carpet of flowers and images allude to country village life, and bizarre, engaging figures are painted in a miniaturist manner like a latter-day exuberant Book of Kells manuscript. All are densely interwoven around the emblazoned red-orange core, a bursting seed at the centre of the earth sending out streaming energy lines. The head of a man extends into space like one of the fern fronds; he is not only in the landscape but of the landscape. Above, a woman, like a fertility symbol, has also become the mellifluous bee supping at the flower, at the nectar of life. As he painted the work Olsen wrote in his journal, 'roots of tangled vines and flowers...develop into cats and dogs, Noela etc. – life seen as the delirium of love – Clarendon is the leitmotif of it all'. He noted the poem by Thomas was the other motivating factor:

> *The force that through the green fuse drives the flower*
> *Drives my green age...*
> *The force that drives the water through the rocks*
> *Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams*
> *Turns mine to wax.*
> *And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins*
> *How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.*[423]

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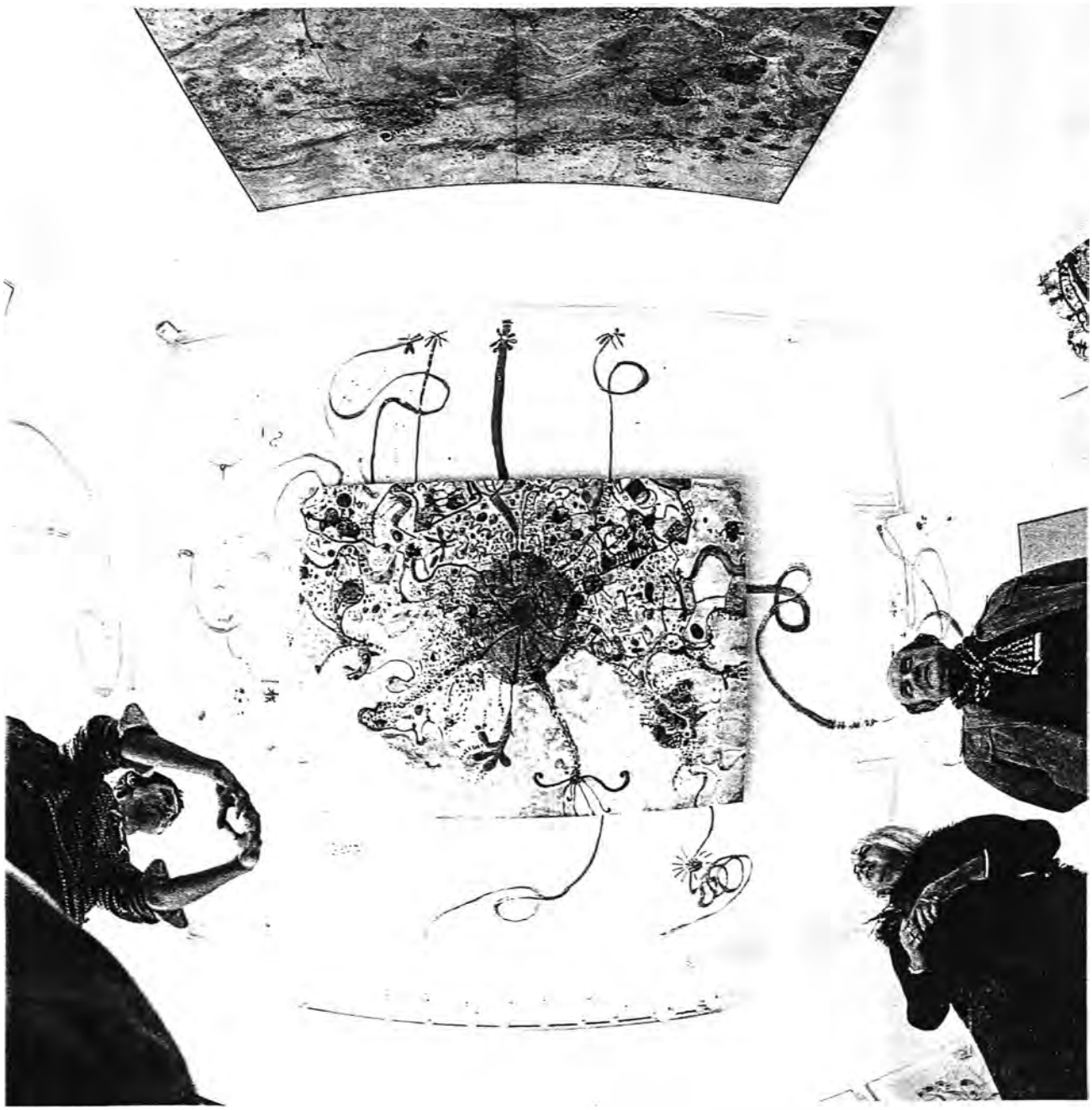
423 See *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, op.cit., p.1176.



John Olsen and Noela Hjorth (right) and friend at Tynte Gallery, Adelaide, with *Where the bee sucks, there suck I* in its first stage, displayed on the ceiling for Olsen's exhibition at the gallery in March-April 1984. Original photograph: Jan Dalman

This work was originally exhibited as a ceiling painting at Tynte Gallery, Adelaide, in April 1984 with the title from Thomas's poem.[424] While the original conception remained the same, Olsen added to the work on and off, finally 'letting it go' in 1986 under the new title *Where the bee sucks, there suck I* from Shakespeare's *The Tempest:*

Where the bee sucks, there suck I
In a cowslip's bell I lie;
There I couch when owls do cry.
On the bat's back I do fly
After summer merrily;
Merrily, merrily shall I live now
Under the blossom that hangs on the bough.

The two poems - by Thomas and by Shakespeare - sum up different but connected aspects of the work: the powerful, underlying energy forces of nature which unite all things in the former, and the lighter, more evidently joyous mood of participating in and celebrating the natural world and country life in the latter.

The show at Tynte Gallery, coinciding with the Adelaide Festival, also included *Golden Summer, Clarendon* (purchased by the Art Gallery of New South Wales), a number of landscapes based on the surrounding South Australian landscape such as *Fleurieu Peninsula* and *Foxy Night Clarendon*, as well as some of his desert-inspired works like *Still life influenced by the Desert.* Also in the show were a number of pots made by Robert Mair that he had decorated. On the invitation he wrote in his distinctive script: 'I dedicate this exhibition to my spiritual friends for many years: Dylan Thomas, the Haiku master Basho & my joy in living in South Australia'. Having delivered the paintings to the gallery in March, he noted in his journal, 'After all these years still a nervousness, a tightening knot returns to me on these occasions'. The exhibition received largely favourable reviews, with the best of the works being compared with the best of his paintings twenty years before.[425]

The Clarendon season series was continued in *Clarendon Spring: Make Sure the Sun Wipes its Feet* (pl.110), the title of which comes from a line uttered by Mrs Ogmore-Pritchard in Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood.*[426] Here, the broadly painted rays of the sun enter through the door of the outlined house inhabited by

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[424] Many months were spent by the author attempting to locate the painting of the first title!
[425] See Neville Weston, *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 13 March 1984 and Peter Ward, *Australian*, 28 March 1984.
[426] Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood*, J.M. Dent & Sons, London, 1965, p.17.

fried eggs, bowls, tables, chairs and odd faces. In contrast to the contemplative lyricism of the autumn and summer paintings, Olsen allows his more effusive propensity free reign, in the wide range of forms and marks which spill out over the entire surface. The relationship to Thomas, while in no way directly descriptive, is found in the evocation of the busy springtime atmosphere through the dense, cumulative nature of the imagery:

> There's the clip clop of horses on the sunhoneyed cobbles of the humming streets, hammering of horseshoes, gobble quack and cackle, tomtit twitter from the bird-ounced boughs, braying on Donkey Down...Oh the Spring whinny and morning moo from the clog dancing farms...Mrs Organ Morgan's general shop where everything is sold: custard, buckets, henna, rat-traps, shrimp-nets, sugar, stamps, confetti, paraffin, hatchets, whistles.[427]

By contrast, the final painting of the series, *A Road to Clarendon: Autumn* (pl.111), reveals the magical ambience of an autumn evening in Clarendon looking out at the sculptural bulk of the hill. Technically richer and more layered and clotted than many of his previous works, it has a matured, aged feeling, 'like the coagulated skin of experience'. The work had been a struggle for Olsen, however. Painted after a period of ill health, it preoccupied him over several months. With the arrival of winter, he noted in his journal that he was still fretting over it; that it needed an oily burst of energy. Over the deep red ground he animated the surface with juicy tentacle-like lines streaming down the canvas. Less obvious are the shadowy, weathered shapes, 'ghosts of Giacometti figures, walking along the side of the dusty road'.[428]

A Road to Clarendon: Autumn was awarded the Wynne Prize at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in December 1985. At the time Olsen was delighted, noting that it reaffirmed his confidence in the series and that the people of the town seemed part of the win.

The following year Olsen began to paint two more versions of the landscape in summer, both quite different to *Golden Summer, Clarendon*. In April 1986 he worked on *Landscape Wounded by Summer* (fig.72) where scrubby notations of tree stumps and wattles cling to the edges of the otherwise sparse, dusky lemon-

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[427] ibid., pp.46 - 47.

[428] Olsen noted that Giacometti was the twentieth-century sculptor he most admired and that when he was a trustee at the Art Gallery of New South Wales he had tried to persuade the gallery to acquire one of this artist's works. 'I was unsuccessful', Olsen noted, 'and therefore the figures appear as ghosts in the painting'.

yellow ground, and are given a subtle emotive resonance by the delicately applied strokes of a wound symbolising the landscape afflicted by the dryness of summer. Continuing the theme on another level was *Broken Egg and Summer Landscape* (pl.112), painted towards the end of the year, where the luscious golden egg, the symbol of life and fertility, breaks onto the parched landscape. A poem that Olsen sent to the author appears to be closely related to this work.

Eggs & Summer Landscape

Let's break the eggs of summer,
Tortillas, sheep tracks -
Lamb's wool stuck on
barbed wire.
Eggs shall stain the sun's
burn on dry grass.
Eggs on my face as well.
The line I draw shall wind a while.
Flowers growing, flowers dying.
Below
Dr. Birdsey sipping
his summer wine.
The village horse lady is
looking at old saddles,
A general store asleep
with drowsy test matches;
Oh! break the eggs of summer
The suffocating flavour
of dry dust. [429]

429 *Broken Egg and Summer Landscape* was exhibited in the Jack Manton Prize at the Queensland Art Gallery in 1987. The author interviewed Olsen for a video that was produced at the time of the exhibition and the correspondence referred to occurred after this time.

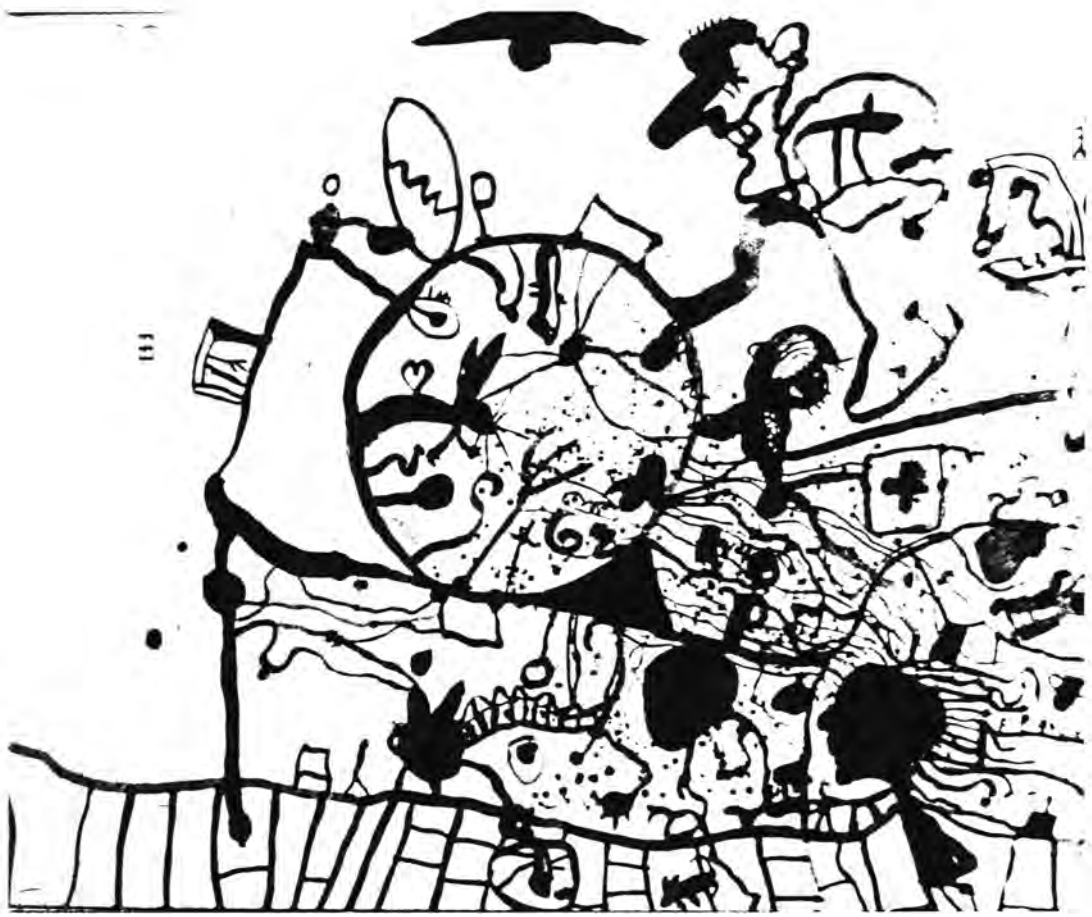


fig.71 *Paella* 1980, ink and watercolour wash on paper, 98 x 116cm
Private Collection

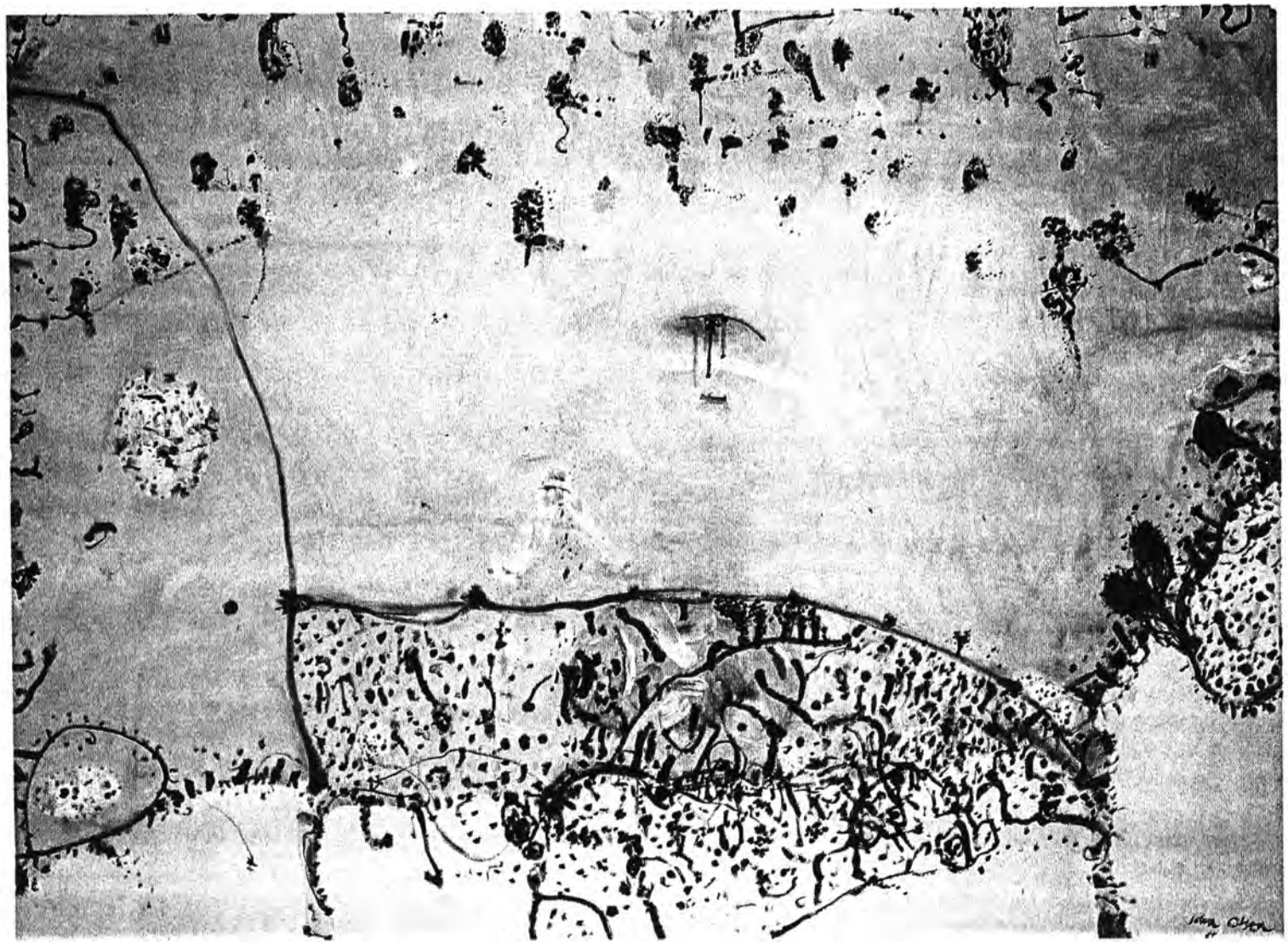
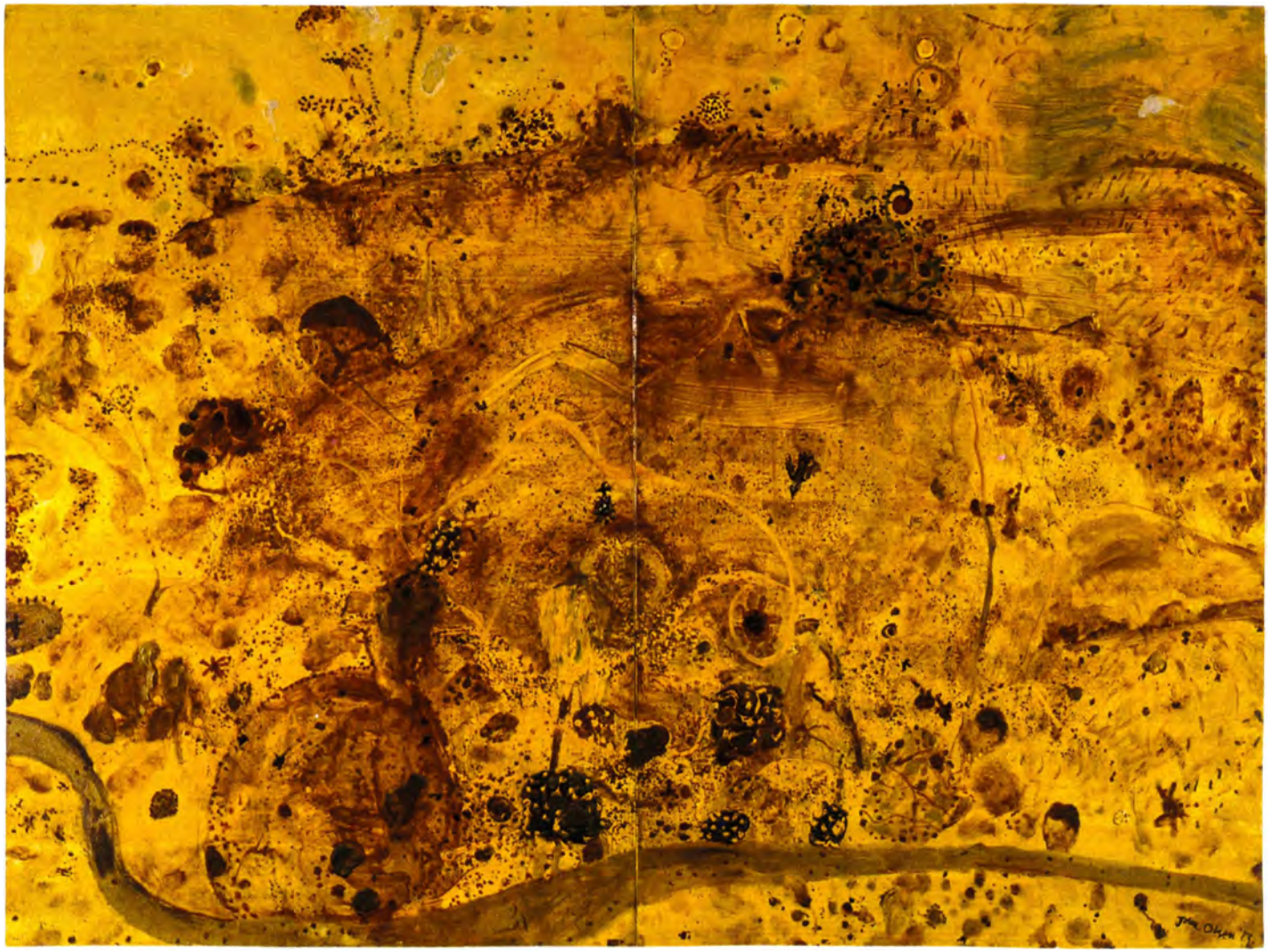


fig.72 *Landscape Wounded by Summer* 1986, oil on canvas, 184.5 x 244.5cm
Private collection

pl.107 *Duck a l'Orange* 1981, oil on canvas, 167 x 182cm
Collection: The Christensen Fund



pl 108 *Golden Summer, Clarendon* 1983, oil on hardboard, 183 x 244cm. Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales
Purchased with assistance from the Salomon brothers, 1985

pl.109 *Where the bee sucks, there suck I* 1984-86, oil on composition board, 182 x 244cm. Collection: National Gallery of Victoria.
Presented through the Art Foundation of Victoria by John Olsen

pl.110 *Clarendon Spring, Make Sure the Sun Wipes its Feet* 1984
oil on hardboard, 184 x 245cm
Collection: The Broken Hill City Gallery

pl.111 *A Road to Clarendon: Autumn* 1985
oil on canvas, 184 x 245.5cm
Collection of the artist

pl.112 *Broken Egg and Summer Landscape* 1986-87, oil on canvas, 197 x 228.5cm
Collection: Wynne Schubert

OLSEN AND OPERA

In March 1984, not long after his exhibition at Tynte Gallery had opened, Olsen was back in his studio working steadily on a commission for the State Theatre complex of the Victorian Arts Centre. In contrast to the Sydney Opera House mural, comparatively little is known of this magnificent series outside Melbourne theatre and opera audiences. There are eight oil paintings in the series, all based on operas: *Largo al Factotum: Tribute to Rossini*; *Britten's Peter Grimes* (pl.113), *Mozart's Papageno the bird catcher in the Magic Flute* (pl.114), *Ravel's L'Enfant et les Sortiléges*, *Verdi's Falstaff in the Washing Basket*, *Don Giovanni* and *Bizet's Carmen in the Bullring*, all painted in 1984, and *Aida* (pl.115), painted in 1985.

In 1979, eleven years after the building of the theatre complex and concert hall had begun, John Truscott was appointed to work on the interior design. Truscott, who grew up in Melbourne, had devoted much of his life to working in theatre, opera and cinema and had won international acclaim for his designs for the films *Camelot* and *The Great Gatsby*. A person of considerable vision, he set out to attain an opulent setting with a great sense of occasion. When Olsen first met Truscott in October 1983, he wrote in his journal:

> Unlike the Sydney Opera House, whose facade is a brilliant white dream of a sculpture and whose interior is blunt and abrasive and poorly detailed, Melbourne's interior is quite contrary, extremely elegant – superbly detailed, and relays Truscott's experience in America (the facade is quite ordinary).

Truscott realised that the entrance to the Theatre Building and the narrow foyers of the State Theatre required major works of art to help create atmosphere, but although a number of private sponsors had given generously (without which the scheme would not have been possible), the funds available for the extensive scale of the project were limited. Many of the painters he had in mind exhibited with Australian Galleries, and he recalled:

> I approached the gallery expecting that they would react with horror. The budget I had nowhere matched the number of paintings needed, or the painters I wanted. But the gallery reacted with total enthusiasm and fired the painters with the same enthusiasm.[430]

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[430] John Truscott, interview with Anthony Clarke, *Age*, 27 October, 1984.

Of all the artists, it was Olsen who dedicated himself to creating a whole series directly relating to one of the primary functions of the State Theatre complex: the staging of opera. To assist in this process, Truscott sent Olsen taped recordings and information on a wide range of operas, which the artist played over and over again in his studio in Clarendon while he was working. Despite the restricted funds, the automatic acceptance of works was not assured. Truscott set high standards, and several artists' works were not accepted in the first instance as they did not fit into his overall conception. Although he was pleased with Olsen's first work, *Largo al Factotum: Tribute to Rossini*, he felt that the second, *Debussy Contemplating the Constellations*, a work of deep blue tonalities, was too muted. In his journal Olsen noted: 'I agree and will rework it. I must not forget the theatrical nature of the building'.[431]

After completing the third large panel, *Bizet's Carmen in the Bullring*, he commenced work on the smaller panels, which are among the most engaging. Olsen was much impressed by Benjamin Britten's haunting opera, *Peter Grimes*, and the 'psychic whirlings of the criminally insane Grimes'. The music and libretto potently combine the atmospheric effects of the shifting tides and moods of the sea with Grimes's psychological tensions and obsessions. At flood tide under a gale force wind the sea gallops, boils, swallows the land.

> Now it's veering in from the sea – will eat the land, will eat the land, will eat the land. Flooding, flooding our seasonal fears...God has his ways which are not ours. His high tide swallows up the shores.[432]

John Olsen vividly captures this sense of the engulfing tide through the expressive manipulation of paint in *Britten's Peter Grimes* (pl.113).The palette is dominated by cobalt, ultramarine and cerulean blues and dark emerald greens, highlighted with touches of chrome yellow and crimson. From the main swirling mass evoking marine life, Grimes's head extends into the spacious, more flatly painted sea. After finishing the painting, John Olsen wrote in his journal: 'I have dipped into the expressionist bucket to express this, I am wondering if the outcome which is animistically vital but in turn magnificently ugly will be too much for the rich jewellery and mink set?'.

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431 Olsen eventually decided not to include *Debussy Contemplating the Constellations* and the work was later sold to a private collector.

432 See libretto for Britten's *Peter Grimes*, Boosey and Hawkes, New York, 1945.

Olsen also painted two works based on Mozart's operas *Don Giovanni* and *The Magic Flute*. In both instances, a luminous central figure is placed against a dark ground, but whereas the rather strange *Don Giovanni* alludes to the love and menacing terrors of that opera, his version of *The Magic Flute* focuses on the enchanting character of *Papageno the bird catcher*. Of all the artistic interpretations of this coquettish figure, Olsen's must surely rate as one of the most delightful and imaginative.

In the libretto, Papageno catches birds for the Queen of the Night and her Three Ladies, for which he is rewarded a daily allowance of wine, cake and sweet figs. However, after mendaciously boasting that he has slain a serpent, he is punished by having his mouth fastened with a lock. He appears in a costume covered with feathers, which prompts the description of him as being more bird than human.

Such metamorphic imagery was naturally no obstacle to Olsen and he created an almost fetishist form, where the pointed beak and eye of a bird protrudes from Papageno's head, while his posterior is adorned with a set of splendid tail feathers. The honey-gold body is inhabited by a maze of lines, dots and feather shapes, painted in bright, primary colours and, in an unusual move for this artist, includes collaged downy feathers and some attenuated ones from the South Australian rosellas he found in his garden in Clarendon. Although in the opera, Papageno carries several birds in his cage, Olsen simplified this in his composition by painting just one bird, again with a local flavour – an Australian king parrot – hanging upside down in its cage.

The other small panels include *Ravel's L'Enfant et les Sortiléges*, a children's opera based on a fairytale written by Colette. Here, the delicate whimsy of the tale is captured by Olsen in his depiction of the scene in which a tiny boy at a huge table, trying to do his homework (who, in fact, longs to do all the things that are forbidden) sees inanimate objects come alive as a teapot pours itself and an excited clock balances precariously on the corner of the table. Humour of a decidedly more boisterous kind is conveyed in Verdi's *Falstaff in the Washing Basket*, where the artist alights on a moment of great farcical proportions in the opera as the portly Falstaff's head rises up from the radiant washing basket.

By the time the Victorian Arts Centre was officially opened on 29 October 1984, seven of Olsen's paintings were hung in the State Theatre foyer. Despite this already significant contribution, Olsen wanted to paint one final work to complete the series

– 'a daunting task; Verdi's most tragic opera set in the magnificent drift of ancient Egypt – "Aida"'. This monumental work is undoubtedly one of the most unusual in Olsen's career to date. He worked tenaciously on it for two and a half months. From the start he recognised that the pomp, ritual and ceremony of this epic opera demanded a highly considered and formal approach. 'This pleased me very much. Dip into the rich delta of Egyptian signs – keep the colour simple, blacks and ivory as the principal key.' In a drawing in his journal he explored ideas for the composition, initially including a head of the god Osiris in the centre. However, in the painting itself he decided to concentrate on the ritual elements through bold symmetry, replacing the head with a hieratic, flatly painted central form. This conveys the 'semi-faceless image of justice', which Verdi visualised as a massed, inflexible power and is the tomb into which the central character of Radames is cast. In a letter sent to John Truscott on 24 April 1985 Olsen wrote:

> At last you have 'Aida'...[It] is different from all the others in the foyer. Firstly I came to the conclusion that in order to give the feeling of the Opera a certain sanction of eclecticism was called for. The work is full of signs and symbols – the baboon, 'Thoth' the arbiter of justice in the nether world is painted from drawings I did in the game parks of Africa...as well as the jackal 'Anibus' who guarded the sacred sites and represented truth. The falling horse effigy is a sacred mirror stand...love is tipped over. A leg above is an elephant's trunk, a reminder of what opera can have in its full splendour.

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FURTHER TAPESTRIES

John Olsen's seemingly endless powers of invention were also applied throughout the 1980s to numerous tapestry designs with the Victorian Tapestry Workshop. In 1967, at the time of his return from Portugal (where his earlier tapestry designs were woven), he had been calling for a major tapestry workshop to be established in Australia.[433] The workshop's director, Sue Walker, notes that since its inception in 1976, Olsen has played a significant role in contributing to the workshop's growing reputation.[434] Apart from *Joie de Vivre* (pl.46), these tapestries, while still essentially decorative in nature, generally came closer than most of the earlier ones to capturing Olsen's calligraphic line, vibrant colour and generosity of spirit. Among the most successful were *Paella* (pl.116) a work of diving, looping lines around a

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[433] See 'Australians are Making Tapestry', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 January 1971.
[434] Sue Walker, interview with the author.

paella dish, *Rising sun* (pl.117) and *Light playing with evolution.*(pl.118). The joyous tapestry *Rising sun* continues Olsen's fascination with the life-giving power of the sun, where the rising form, which also bears analogy with a hydra or a coral polyp, is inhabited by a myriad of interconnecting lines and pools. Here, prominent, brilliant red sinuous lines extend upwards and outwards exploring space, balanced by a decorative little strip at the base. One of the weavers to work on the tapestry, Cresside Collette, who also worked on an earlier tapestry *Life Force*,[435] recalls:

> I suppose I've always had a very special feeling for John's work because the first tapestry that ever really registered with me was *Joie de Vivre* in the National Gallery of Victoria...I really loved it...and so I guess I was thrilled to be working on a design by him...When I worked on *Rising sun* with another weaver I really explored the idea of linking lines...and in getting that movement of surface and texture working.[436]

The feeling for growth and a free interpretation of forms, like organisms seen under a microscope, recurs in *Light playing with evolution*, appropriately enough commissioned for the Zoology Department of Melbourne University. Once again it is evident that Olsen's inveterate curiosity in the natural world could be relayed in different media. The extraordinary quality of this particular tapestry lies in the way that the weaver, Andrea May, has managed to approximate the fluid transparency of watercolour washes in Olsen's original design without losing the intensity of tone and colour. 'John had worked on quite a few tapestries before', May recalled, 'and he knew what was going to happen and could look at something and know whether it would work. We both agreed that we wanted it to be quite strong and at the same time have a certain subtlety'.[437]

In January 1985 Olsen travelled to Europe, where he visited many galleries. His journal from that period reflects his continuing enjoyment of Giacometti, whose figures appeared like 'linear, clotting masses', and Monet's *Waterlilies*, which he noted he would prefer to any work by Leonardo or Michelangelo, 'quite, quite transcendental'. He then travelled on to Spain, the country which had exerted an significant impact on him many years before and which again provided the inspiration for some of his most memorable paintings of his artistic life to date.

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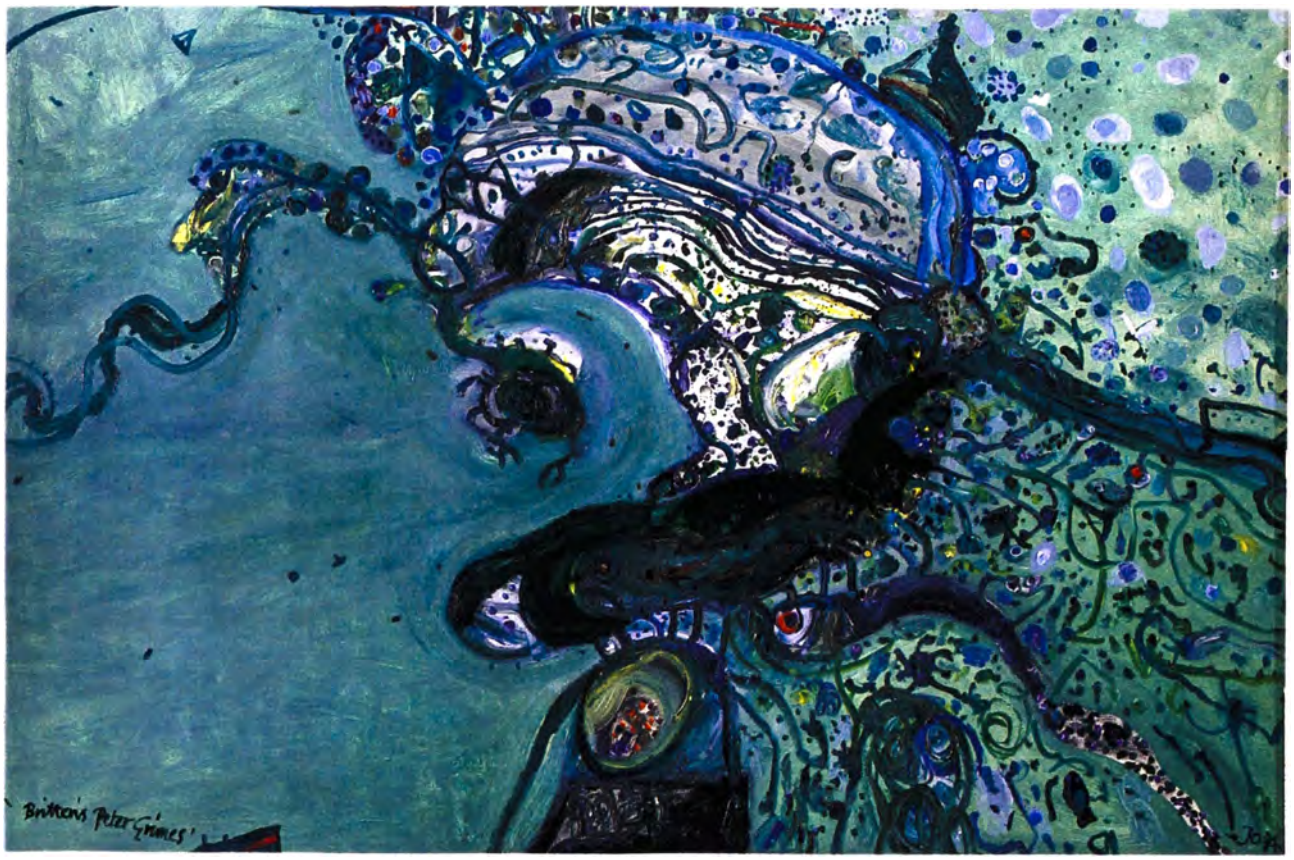
[435] *Life Force*, 1986, was donated by Sir Andrew and Lady Grimwade to the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, Melbourne, in the same year that it was created.
[436] Cresside Collette, interview with the author, Victorian Tapestry Workshop, 1990.
[437] Andrea May, interview with the author, Victorian Tapestry Workshop, 1990.

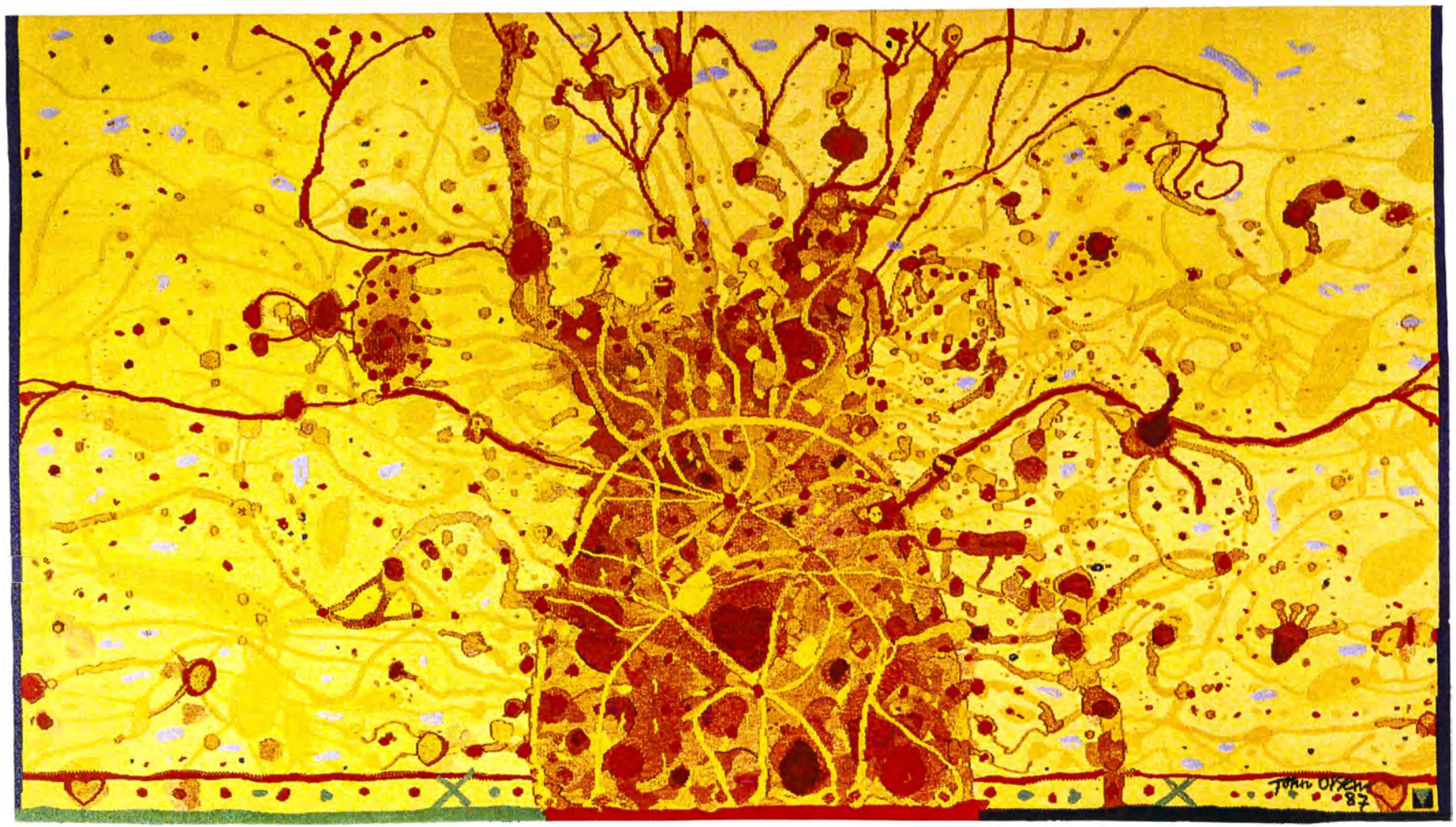


pl.113 *Britten's Peter Grimes* 1984, oil on canvas, 120 x 180cm
Victorian Art Centre Public Art Collection
Gift of Loti Smorgon 1984

pl.114 *Mozart's Papegeno the bird catcher in the Magic Flute* 1984, oil and mixed media on canvas, 120 x 180cm.
Victorian Art Centre Public Art Collection. Gift of Loti Smorgon

pl.115 *Aida* 1985, oil on hardboard, 188 x 358cm. Victorian Art Centre Public Art Collection. Gift of Loti Smorgon 1984

pl.116 *Paella* 1981, tapestry, 152.4 x 365.7cm, designed by John Olsen, woven at the Victorian tapestry Workshop.
Collection: Smorgon Consolidated Industries, Victoria



pl.117 *Rising sun* 1987, tapestry, 182 x 306cm, designed by John Olsen, woven at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop. Private collection

pl.118 *Light playing with evolution* 1989, tapestry, 200 x 250cm
Designed by John Olsen, woven by the Victorian Tapestry Workshop
The University of Melbourne Art Collection

MEMORIES OF SPAIN REVISITED

The knife, the cart-wheel, the razor and prickly beards of shepherds, the bare moon, the fly damp cupboards, rubble, religious images covered with lacework, quick-lime, and the wounding outline of eaves and watch towers, in Spain all these have minute grass blades of death, as well as allusions and voices perceptible to the alert mind, exciting our memory with the inert air of our own passing.

Lorca, *The Theory and Function of the Duende.*[438]

My true philosophy is the observation of the Quixotic man who thinks he will change everything for the better and eternally finds himself at the fountain of the irrational.

John Olsen.[439]

As a young, emerging artist in the late 1950s, Olsen had been deeply impressed by Spain; by the art, poetry, music and architecture of the country, by the oldness of the Mediterranean culture, by cobbled streets and stone houses weathered by time, men and women dressed in black silhouetted against white walls, louts and larrikins in the local bars, pedlars' carts, bullfights, secular and religious processions. It was partly through the distillation of his memories of the drama, passion and often violent, stark contrasts that had resulted in Olsen's first major breakthrough after his return to Australia in 1960 – *Spanish Encounter.* The rich symbolism of Spain and Portugal and the atmosphere of village life had been re-explored in the mid-1960's through archetypal, emblematic imagery and, on occasion, vibrant colour. Twenty years later, in 1986, his art was again amplified and invigorated by his impressions of the place. On 4 January 1985, Olsen wrote in his journal:

> How wonderful it is to be back in Spain! I did write to an old student of mine/ I am coming back to Spain to see Picasso's 'Guernica' in its proper context in Spain, with its proper parents: Goya's last black pictures – Zurburan [sic] – the earthy tonalities of Spanish painting. Also to buy a black hat to remind me of my proper beginnings pointing towards some sense of maturity that passed to me in Spain.

Olsen noted that despite the addition of skyscrapers in Madrid, many aspects of traditional life had been maintained, with the major changes being in the more vital, liberated atmosphere that had come about after Franco's departure. In Barcelona he

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438 *Lorca*, introduced and edited by J. L. Gili, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1960, p.133.
439 John Olsen's journal, 1986.

was impressed by the beautiful narrow streets leading off from the port, the run-down but attractive tawdriness in the local bars serving 'excellent tapas'; by the Picasso Museum ("Las Meninas" improvisations on Velasquez – much better than reproductions'), Gaudi's *Temple of the Holy Family* and by the paintings of Goya and Velasquez.

It was a year later, after the images he had assimilated were filtered through the process of memory, sparking recollections of the more distant past, that Olsen began to work consistently on related drawings and paintings. Lorca once wrote: 'One returns from inspiration as if from a foreign country. The poem is the narration of the voyage. Inspiration supplies the image, but not its dress, and to give it that dress one must observe – calmly dispassionately – the quality and sonority of words'.[440]

Despite the obvious similarities of colouration and some of the imagery in his earlier Spanish works and those of the 1980s, there were also distinctive differences in Olsen's approach. In contrast to the bravura of *Spanish Encounter*, where he appeared to be vehemently attacking the subject through thick, black, dynamic line, in these later works, while the unexpected and risk-taking factors were still vital elements in the painting process, there was also a more obviously considered response to the paint quality and pictorial structure. The building process and subtle layering of ideas which informed these works was 'a conscious preparation for an unconscious event'.[441]

After his return from Spain in 1985 he completed his paintings for the State Theatre complex in Victoria, as well as a commission for the Pancontinental Mining Company (later exhibited as the 'Gold' exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales).[442] By the time he had finished work on the latter, he felt an increasingly urgent need for a concentrated period of work when he could return to a more internalised and intuitive means of expression. On 14 February 1986 Olsen wrote in his journal: 'I am preparing myself for a working stint; no interruptions permitted. I have the urge for a new depth. Commission completed – even delivered. I shall sing the song of the abandoned self'.

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[440] Federico Garcia Lorca, *Deep Songs and Other Prose*, edited and translated by Christopher Maurer, New Directions, New York, 1980.
[441] John Olsen, interview with the author.
[442] In July-August 1985 Olsen travelled to the Paddington gold mine in Western Australia, about 34 kilometres north of Kalgoorlie, accompanied by his son Timothy. This resulted in thirty-two paintings and drawings which were exhibited in the 'Gold' exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in October 1986.

During the following few months he worked on a wide range of images associated with Spain: a sensitive painting of Spanish baskets; the grand, sweeping boulevard of Madrid; wiry Giacometti-like figures descending Spanish steps; and the recurring theme of *Goya's Dog*. Among his most superb works were those including demotic imagery, graffiti-like, scribbly, figurative notations on creamy white walls against strong, formal architectural components of Spanish doors and streets, as well as his conception of the tinker, *El Amoladar*. In his 1986 journal Olsen noted: 'Never forget the 20th Century is the triumph of the common man, give a heave ho to the Hellenic vision'.

While retaining his humour and vitality, Olsen began to reveal more openly the possibility of doubt, 'the shadow on the door'. His humanism comes through his grasp of human frailties and ambiguities; that to be human is also to be fallible. Alongside and overlapping with memories of Spain was his exploration of the irrational aspects of human nature and the sense that there are many things in life we can never fully understand, perhaps, most of all, the web of contradictions within ourselves. As he once said, 'It takes longer to understand a region of the mind than a country'.

During this period Olsen was reading W.B. Yeats, Samuel Beckett and Federico Garcia Lorca, and essential ideas expressed in their writing were often interwoven in his art. While these literary sources are obviously quite distinctive, the connections for Olsen were their insights into people looking in from the outskirts of society: the traveller, the vagabond, the gypsy, the old man – 'the tattered coat upon a stick'.[443] These sources are important because although Olsen's work took several divergent paths over the following four years, a strong pattern of linkages can be established from drawings and paintings inspired by Beckett's *Molloy*, to *Calle Estrecha* (pl.120) and *El Amoladar* (pl.122), through to *Letters to a Younger Artist* (discussed in the following chapter) and ultimately to *Beckett Joins the Gypsy Caravan* (pl.131) at the end of the decade.

During late February and March 1986 Olsen was reading Beckett's *Molloy*, one of the clearest statements of this writer's ongoing preoccupations: alienation and isolation. As early as 1958 he had written in his journal:

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[443] This phrase comes from Yeats's poem, *Sailing to Byzantium*, see *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, op.cit., p.886.

> Beckett is a poet whose unwearied theme is fallen man...his broken creatures have seen the possibility of fulfilment; they remember they cannot believe the great myths by which humanity has sustained itself along its gruesome pilgrimage. The failing wills, crumbling bodies live out their patterns in a world where the leaves are falling, the wind dying away, the sun setting forever.

In 1986 he painted *Malloy* [sic]*and Moran*, where the figures, barely perceptible on a large, dark cart with baskets hanging from it, are travellers dislocated from the world around them. His pen and ink and wash drawing of the same title (fig.73) is one of his most engaging comments on the tragi-comic nature of human fallibility, where a distracted Molloy rides his bicycle with Moran attached to the front wheel. We are reminded of his earlier drawings and paintings of bicycles, but now with an added psychological twist. Beckett writes: 'Life is a thing of beauty and a joy forever. "Do you think he meant human life?" Moran asks but Gaber has disappeared'.[444]

Since the start of the decade, in drawings such as *Paella*, as well as in a number of free, random drawings on Hosha paper, Olsen had been exploring the tension of black against white. Over the following few years he commented on the associations of black with Spanish Catholic ritual and with Lorca's conception of the shadow side of life and with death, as well as the many artists who had employed black as a powerful visual and metaphorical source: 'Black is very beautiful, what greater dramatic spring can [be] felt when black meets white. Vide Chinese calligraphy, Rembrandt, Goya and Kline'.

Immediately after finishing reading Beckett's *Molloy*, Olsen began work on *Calle Estrecha (The Narrow Street)* (pl.120), where memories of Spain are intertwined around the three Spanish doors with 'Beckett-like talkative narrative, disconnected by elements of surprise, tragic, sombre, quixotic and [the] irrational' as well as an ironic humour. On our right a dog with a human head enters, which he describes as 'a mangy (El perro de Goya) dog', and which is also perhaps a subconscious recollection of Beckett's Molloy who, having ridden over the dog of a woman called Lousse, is taken into her home, drugged and replaces the dog in her affections.[445] Also on the right is a skinny figure saying *Dice nada* (say nothing), the outline of a sardonic head laughing and, amidst the tiny figurative and abstract notations, 'an Irish face looking at his erect penis in wonderment', a clothes line, an electric light bulb which is also a breast, a little walking stick and a cross above a doorway. As

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444 See Deidre Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1978, p.369.
445 ibid., p.370.

in *Spanish black door*, the quixotic imagery is balanced by the solidity of the street and the strong compositional structure which adds a certain formal elegance, also very Spanish.

Spanish black door, like the related work, *Semana Santa (Holy Week)* (pl.119) was painted a year after *Calle Estrecha*. In the former, John Olsen again recalls the houses in Spanish towns and cities built right onto the street. Here, in the brightly coloured mass of calligraphic lines, Olsen was attempting to suggest human activity, gossip and interrelationships going on behind the solid black door:

> It is the silence of the door that increases the allegory and the talkative nature of the picture on either side of it: 'Buenos Dias Senor, have a glass of wine. Are you in love with that girl up the street there? How dare you, all the neighbours are talking about it'... And there's that sort of drift and what's implied...is a narrative. It is a modern narrative. I hope to encompass humour, irony, chance...a chance meeting, something that you could never premeditate. I like to bring numbers into it, so that it has that slightly unpredictable quality. That is all accentuated by the formality of the door.[446]

El Amolodar (The Tinker) (pl.122), like *Calle Estrecha*, is one of Olsen's most accomplished paintings. It is a poetic, highly adventurous work in which the artist effectively conveys the sense of the tinker, predominantly through the odd assortment of his wares – pots, pans, brushes, scissors – held together by the square form of the cart. This shape, which echoes the format of the canvas, merges with the vibrant, yet subtle manipulation of colour to provide a compelling structure. The lettering, the colour and the ladder recall the Spanish painter Joan Miró; yet the overall conception of the painting is also quite distinctive. In the first instance, it was inspired by an unshaven pedlar Olsen had seen in the village market many years before, pushing his cart on bicycle wheels into the village square where he sharpened scissors and knives. By the end of the day he would be quite drunk, having consumed several bottles of cheap red wine. However, this was only the starting point, the linchpin for Olsen's painting upon which he freely elaborated during the painting process. In a journal entry written around the time this work was painted, Olsen provides valuable insights:

> El Amoladar (The Tinker). First I draw in the cart which is a kind of altar – his dignity (...only failed temporarily each afternoon) and worship of his craft. He mends old things, he turns blunt to sharp. I arrange a whole grid around these associations. I have a thought I

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[446] Olsen, interview with the author, *The Jack Manton Prize* video, op.cit.

> ought to introduce him. 'Por que va no tiene el tiempo' (why don't you have the time?) and since I want him to feel Mr. Big I make his name in big letters EL AMOLADAR. Yet this still feels insufficient and I can't find the proper answer. I refer to Hugo's 'Teach yourself Spanish in 3 months' and without looking open any page and point. The answer is 'Por Que el cadavar ha traslado al hospital para hacer la autopsia' - the body has been transferred to the hospital to have an autopsy.

In the course of his recent visit to Madrid, Olsen had been stimulated by a painting in the Prado Museum by Goya called *The Dog* (c.1820–23) where, in a strange, long compositional format, the head of a dog peers up from the dark ground, probing the vast space of the sky like 'a primitive radar asking for a sign'. Olsen was struck and puzzled by the way that this painting contravened tradition in Spanish art: it was the domain of the virgin and saints to look heavenward. This was amplified by the fact that, in Spain, the dog was generally considered among the lowly orders; that 'in the Catholic sense...they don't have a soul and therefore that action of Goya's comes out as something pretty incredible'. Olsen responded with gusto: 'I thought to myself, I am going to bring this dog back to Australia. I am going to bring that bloody dog!'.

Bring it back he did, but while the Spanish painting provided the starting point, *Goya's Dog* became transformed in a loosely thematic array of paintings and drawings incorporating a wide range of associations surrounding dogs in general; a subject which had long been a source of fascination for Olsen.[447]

He perceived that among the connecting links between Spain and Australia were the colours of much of the landscape, or what he called 'an emotional colouration of the place', expressed in burnt siennas, raw ochres and black. In *Goya's Dog - Life escaping a Void*, a dark, sombre painting, the composition is dominated by a large, black void. The dog rising up is enmeshed in a network of lines over the umber ground. The idea of the dog as a shadow on the earth 'connected to the earth's pulse' was repeated in brush drawings, where the integration of the animal with a myriad of lines recalls Olsen's idea of the landscape as a nervous system.

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[447] Olsen had been painting dogs since the 1960s and they came to suggest a wide variety of possible meanings for him. In his Sydney works his dogs were often an integral part of the mad, juicy-fruit, fecund environment of this city, while his subconcious association with dogs is expressed in a more surreal way in *Man and Angry Dog* (private collection, Sydney). He was also fascinated by the role that dogs play in the Australian psyche in relation to outback regions: 'Queensland healers and half bloody dingoes that have had the hell kicked out of them and were very territorial', - as well as their companiable relationships to man in some of these remote areas.

In his journal Olsen made many references to the nature of displaced street dogs in Spain, to the elegant dogs brought to the village of Ibiza that had subsequently become street dogs: 'a dog running through the village looking nervously to each side – hair bristling – out of his territory – just like man'. In another entry he jotted down: 'Dog – eating discarded pieces of paella. Paella – saffron rice, fish, chicken – like the sun radiates its life force'. The latter is clearly related to *Goya's Dog and Paella* (pl.124), where the vast shape of the dog is suspended over a golden dish of the paella around which a myriad of notations pertaining to the urban, domestic environment, little loutish figures and other bizarre images occur.

A number of these Spanish works, as well as Olsen's recent Clarendon landscapes, were exhibited at Australian Galleries during September–October 1986. The critical response was highly favourable, with the National Gallery of Victoria acquiring *Calle Estrecha* and *Where the bee sucks, there suck I.* In a review of the show, the art critic Gary Catalano noted how much more radical Olsen appeared at 58 years of age compared with some of the younger artists exhibiting during the same period. 'At a time when the youthfulness of an artist is seen as an index of merit, the irony of this situation is a welcome one indeed.' He accurately observed that Olsen's radicalism (in the accepted sense of the term) came from his 'ability to play havoc with our aesthetic expectations', and that to simply like or dislike the paintings, as opposed to entering into their vitality, was to miss the point.[448]

The prelude to this show was a significant survey exhibition of his work ,'John Olsen: In Search of the Open Country, 1961–1986', at Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, from August – September 1986. Curated by the director of the Gallery, Maudie Palmer, the survey included a selection of twenty-five oils and watercolours spanning two and a half decades of Olsen's work. Apart from a few, more limited attempts, this was the first opportunity for many to attain an overview of this artist's output which, while emphasising his landscapes (as the inspired title of the show suggests), also inevitably incorporated a wider array of themes.

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[448] *Age*, 24 September 1986.

DEPARTURE FROM CLARENDON

In May 1986, Olsen and Noela Hjorth had married in a legal ceremony at 'The Old Rectory' in Clarendon, followed by another festive celebration in the studio. However, during the following year their relationship became increasingly fraught with emotional and psychological turmoil. This led to a deepening disillusionment on both sides which had reached the point of no return by September 1987, when Olsen went to Sydney to work on a mural for the Darling Harbour project. Although there were attempts at reconciliation after this point, these were unsuccessful. During the preceding months Olsen had done a number of paintings and drawings which reveal his state of mind in the final stages of the Clarendon period.[449]

Hanging on the Edge (fig.75) is about living on the edge of a metaphorical desert or, as he put it, 'on the edge of everything that can be difficult'. The diagonal line running down the page is the dividing edge, the tightrope between two planes of thought. In the upper-most section, a scrawny, vigorously drawn dog looks down from a precarious vantage point, while further along, Olsen's bemused self-portrait literally hangs on the boundary line. Below him is a circus tent and a mass of squiggly markings, dots and dashes like frenetic notations of sheet music. A linking thread extending from his own portrait connects him with the contradictory, sparse desert area, where soft, pastel lines stream towards the perimeter.

Other 'portrait-landscapes' include a drawing, *Self Portrait in Clarendon* and the painting, *El Delor, No.1*, where his caricatured face hangs off a bulky landform alongside heart shapes symbolising love remembered. It was a time of sadness for Olsen, but rather than conveying self-pity, these portraits paradoxically reveal a sense of the loss of self.

However it was in *El Delor, No.2* (pl.125) that Olsen's grasp of potential crisis in human relationships was most devastatingly expressed. *El Delor*, Spanish for pain or suffering, is at the centre of this extraordinary work, insightfully described by one person who saw it at Australian Galleries as 'the gallows painting'. As Connolly's 'Palinurus' succinctly commented: 'There is no pain equal to that which

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449 These Clarendon works are among the most autobiographical, in an overtly self-referential sense, in Olsen's artistic development, signalling future developments including the portraits of older artists, discussed in the following section, and the later large dark self-portrait, *Donde Voy? Self-portraits in moments of doubt*, 1989.

two lovers can inflict on one another'.[450] Below, two tragi-comic faces are turned away from each other, unable to communicate; while above, the bee, once the symbol of the honey-gatherer, has become a Martian-like creature. Descending from the point where the two bold diagonal lines meet like a clash of cymbals, blood and tears symbolise the anguish, anger and frustration at the loss of sensibility and love.

By contrast, the other paintings Olsen worked on during 1987 were decidedly more quiet in mood. He continued to be inspired by the Clarendon environment, as in *Night Heron, Clarendon*, in which a long-beaked heron set against the rich, brown tonalities of the landcape, evokes the mysterious calm of evening. However, by the end of the year he recognised that his impending departure from this place which had meant so much to him, 'my beloved Clarendon', had become a reality.[451]

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[450] Palinurus, *The Unquiet Grave*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1984.
[451] Noela Hjorth remained at Clarendon after Olsen's departure.

fig.73 *Malloy and Moran* 1986, ink and wash on paper, 52 x 79cm. Private collection

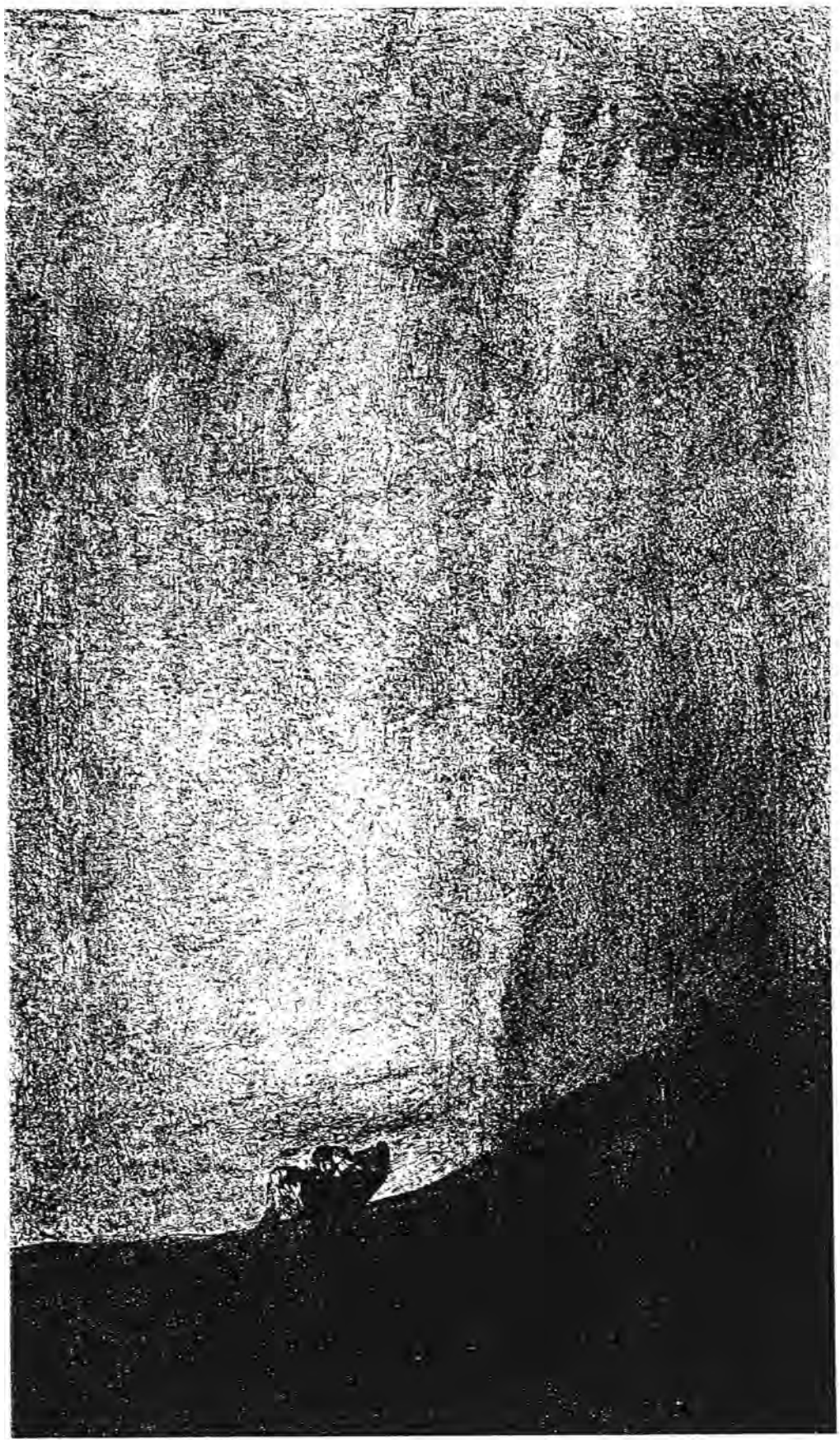


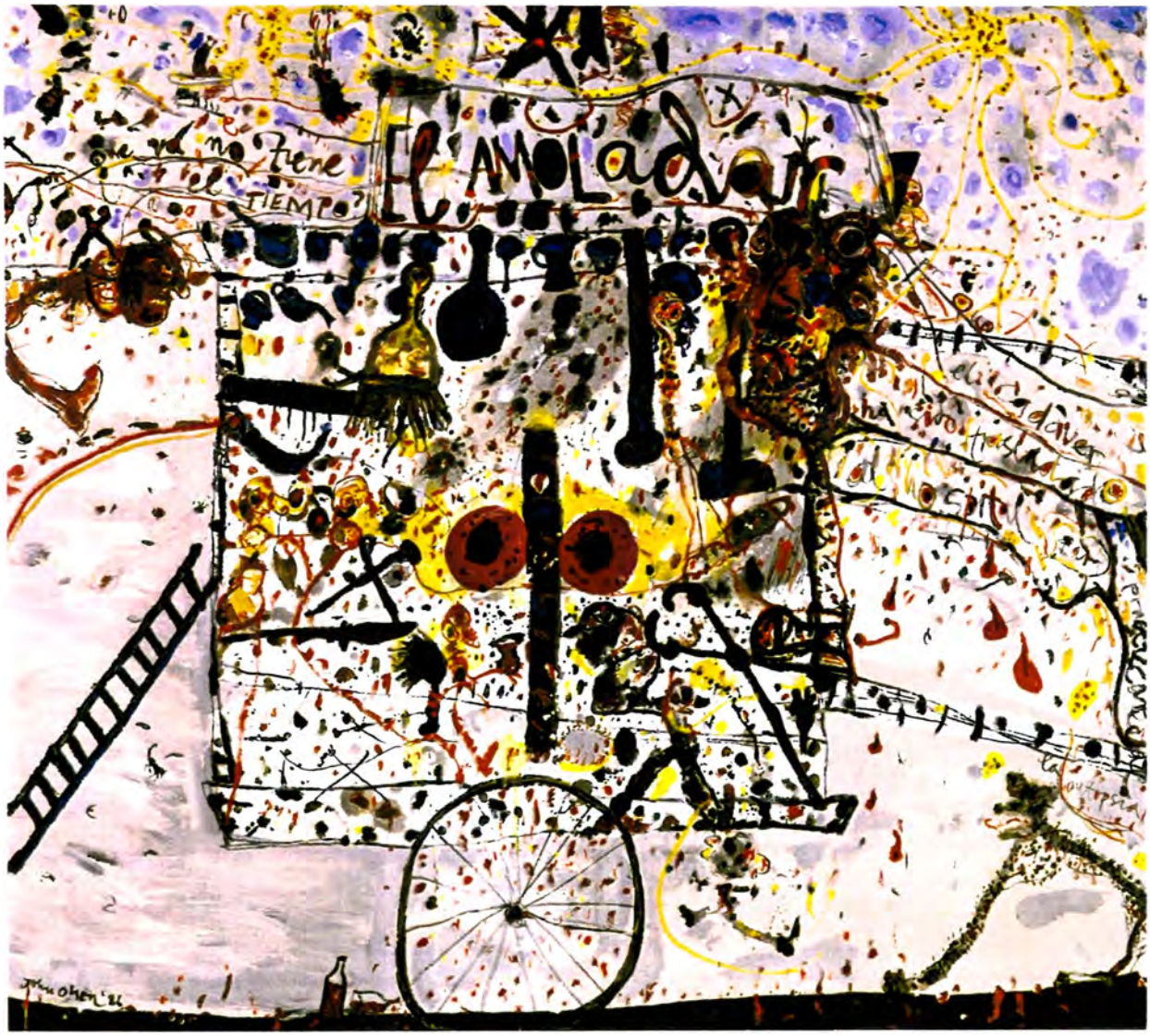
fig.74 Goya, *The Dog* c.1820-23, oil on gesso, 134 x 80cm
Collection: The Prado Museum, Madrid

fig.75 *Hanging on the Edge* 1987,
watercolour, ink and crayon on paper, 189 x 99cm
Private Collection

pl.119 *Semana Santa (Holy Week)* 1987, oil on canvas, 151 x 166cm
Private collection

pl.120 *Calle Estrecha (The Narrow Street)* 1986, oil on canvas, 170 x 216cm
Collection: National Gallery of Victoria. Purchased through the Art Foundation of Victoria with the generous assistance of Eva and Marc Besen

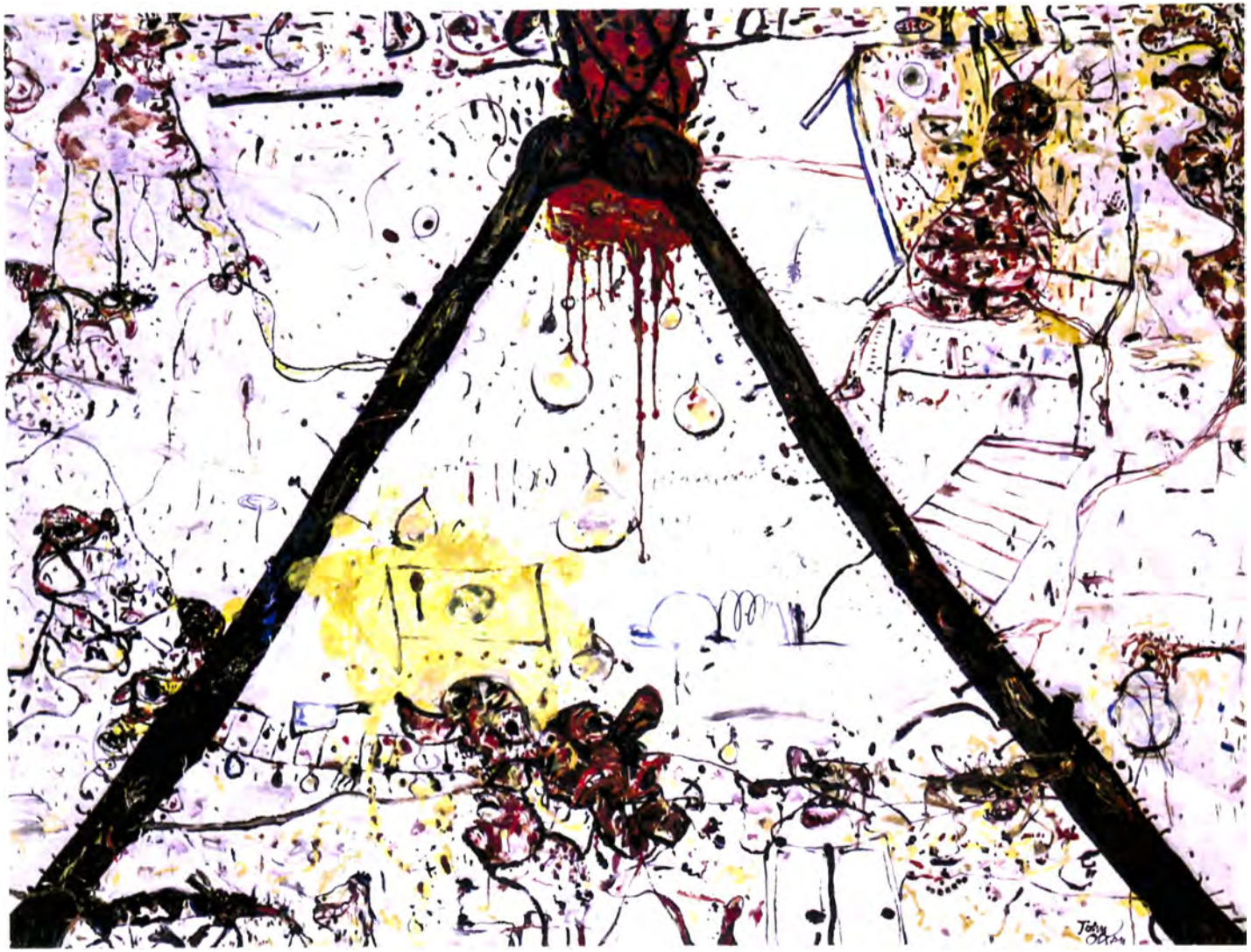
pl.121 *Spanish black door* 1986, oil on canvas, 152 x 213cm. Private collection, Singapore



pl.122 *El Amolodar (The Tinker)* 1986, oil on canvas, 153 x 166cm
Private collection

pl.123 *Goya's Dog, Life escaping a Void* 1985, oil on canvas, 140 x 156cm
Private collection

pl.124 *Goya's Dog and Paella* 1986, oil on canvas, 167 x 213cm. Private collection



pl.125 *El Delor, No.2* 1987, oil on canvas, 197 x 257cm. Chartwell Collection, Centre for Contemporary Art, Hamilton, New Zealand

CHAPTER 12

PORTRAITS OF OTHER ARTISTS

The character of a face in a drawing depends not on its various proportions but on the spiritual light which it reflects.

Matisse[452]

At intervals throughout 1986 and 1987, John Olsen worked on a series of portraits of other artists that would collectively become known as 'Letters to a Young Artist'. They are among the finest achievements of his draughtsmanship, surpassing most of his previous portraits in the level of concentration and empathetic response in the drawing process. Together with the written comments (which are an integral part of the works), they reveal poignant and penetrating insights into the struggles of these artists in old age. In an era which had increasingly come to extol detachment in art, Olsen also aimed to convey his respect for an artistic tradition which, as the title of the series indicates, he wanted to share with younger artists.

The series is, in a sense, both biographical and autobiographical. Olsen elucidates his interpretation of essential aspects of each individual artist and simultaneously provides a retrospective look at those he had long admired. While in some instances he reveals a critical tendency, these drawings are essentially about a disposition of feeling and identification. On one hand this process was a form of reassurance in terms of providing connections at a significant period of his life. It also revealed an increasing awareness of his own mortality. 'The presence of these great, but battered souls has curled a path of recognisable inevitability to my advancing years. If the shadow...fell on them it must surely fall on me.'[453]

When he began the series he had been reading Beckett and Yeats and was examining more closely the strengths and vulnerabilities that come with experience. At the time he made the following random notes in his journal: 'Old shoes are better than new. Observe old men's clothes, Yeats...old men, old women, old dogs, falling hair, falling teeth, faltering steps'.

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452 John Elderfield, *The Drawings of Henri Matisse*, Thames and Hudson, 1984, p.101.
453 *Encounters with Drawing*, op.cit., p.35.

In July 1986, Olsen made mention in his journal of a compelling biography he had been reading on Degas by Roy McMullen.[454] His interest in Degas went back to his early training under John Passmore, who had encouraged him to look to the work of the French master and 'even to copy his artistic phrasing'. While reading the biography, Olsen was struck by the similarities between Degas's intensity and Passmore's own patterns of behaviour. He was also intrigued by the transformation of the elegant, vital personage of Degas in his youth to his physical deterioration in old age. McMullen wrote that Degas (1834–1917) 'had lived to such an age that there was scarcely anyone left to remember the brown-eyed young man who had capered in a Perugia street at five o'clock in the morning'.[455] In his journal Olsen commented:

> So captivated was I by the transition of the youthful enquiry to disillusioned old age, with its accompanying near total blindness ('At my age you don't believe in anyone, you no longer hold to anything, you are screwed'), [that] I have empathised with his situation by doing a pastel and charcoal portrait in the 'screwed' age. Eyesight nearly all gone, a beard unkempt made him resemble King Lear or very late Leonardo, a man of elegance parading in clothes that would not have shamed a clochard, no control of his bladder – fly not always done up – screwed by God!

Olsen did three portraits of Degas: *Degas in old age I* (fig.76), *Degas in old age II* (fig.77) and *Degas – The last years* (fig.78). In the first two, Olsen sought to combine the classical elegance of the man with the disillusionment of ageing. In *Degas in old age II* he conveys a profound and monumental presence. The exploratory winding lines in the body contradict the dark shading over the face and eyes. Permeated by thought, his expression goes way beyond the moment. By contrast, in *Degas – the last years*, the eyes have disappeared under the watery voids signalling his failing eyesight, and the figure has become a mass of fragmented lines and dots, reminiscent of Yeats's lines:

> *An aged man is but a paltry thing,*
> *A tattered coat upon a stick, unless*
> *Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing,*
> *For every tatter in its mortal dress...*[456]

Before he had finished the drawings of Degas, Olsen was thinking of Renoir, bereaved and crippled at the end of his life, yet tenaciously camouflaging his pain

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454 Roy McMullen, *Degas: His Life, Times and Work*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1985.
455 ibid., p.464.
456 W.B. Yeats, *Sailing to Byzantium*, see *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, op.cit., p.886

and holding on to his dream through his art. In the most telling of his studies, *Renoir I* (fig.79), the wheelchair is scantily indicated, and the primary focus is on the artist's face and the paint brush strapped to his rheumatic hand. Olsen was deeply moved by Renoir's humility. After painting a small flower piece in the last hours of his life he said, 'I think I'm beginning to learn something now'.

As was the case with Degas, Olsen's interest in Bonnard went back a long way. In the mid-1960s, when he felt at a crossroads in his own work, the Bonnard Retrospective exhibition at the Royal Academy in London had provided him with a source of considerable encouragement.[457] In 1971, in a review of another Bonnard exhibition, this time at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, he had written that Bonnard, like Giacometti and the Italian-born painter, Morandi, were 'removed from the rhetoric of the avant-garde and shared in their work a burning personal integrity'.[458]

Olsen admired the disengaging grace of Bonnard's work that concealed the effort that went into it. In his eloquent drawing *Bonnard II* (fig.80), he conveys a feeling for this artist's intimate, circumscribed world and obsession with colour, made all the more poignant by his comments in old age: 'I don't have any more yellow left in me'. The concentrated white gouache of the head and the curvilinear lines of the shoulders tapering off in the body create the impression of Bonnard as one of the flowers on his beloved 'Amendier en Fleur', the almond tree beneath his bedroom window, which he painted almost every year in blossom.

In 1987, Olsen continued his work on this series with a couple of bold, forthright portraits of Giacometti holding on to his pummelled, spindly figures with dogged determination. The impact of his audacious portrait of *De Kooning* (fig.82) is attained through the succinct composition and the awry intensity of this artist's expression. Thirty years earlier Olsen had written in his Spanish journal that de Kooning's 'frenzied moving images moved so quickly they seemed almost evil to contemplate.' 'He reminds me of Breton's statement, "The spider and the lobster are brothers under the shell"; his work is firmly steeped in the surrealism of Arshile Gorky.' He noted connections in de Kooning's work with his Dutch antecedents, Ingres and later with Soutine (another artist who Olsen admired).

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457 It is interesting to recall Olsen's words related in Chapter 6: 'He intrigues us to remember the simple pleasures, to avoid anything canned, including art. This is probably why everyone in the Academy was so animated...for Bonnard had told them it's alright to be yourself'.
458 John Olsen, 'Pierre Bonnard', *Art and Australia*, vol.9, no.2, 1971, p.149.

All of the artists portrayed by John Olsen can be seen to be simultaneously part of a tradition and forging new artistic territories through their personal commitment and vision. Yet Olsen was also conscious of the erosion of this continuum in painting and drawing over nearly three decades: 'The range of discourse from one painting to another has just broken up. It is just so awful because it disallows'.[459] The point of the changing notion of what it was to be an artist was forcefully made by Diane Waldman who, writing about Mark Rothko, noted:

> [He] wanted to achieve the grandeur of tradition and at the same time to rebel against tradition. The struggle to reach this paradoxical goal ultimately destroyed his confidence. The tragedy of Rothko's death ...lies not only in the termination of a brilliant career but in that it marked the end of an attitude towards the role of the artist and art itself.[460]

Alongside his sensitive drawing of Rothko, Olsen also warns younger artists of the dangers of unscrupulous dealers. However, he simultaneously notes how vital it is to maintain a certain naivety: 'That's your acceptance of life – to be too smart is not smart'. The notion of artistic freedom and independence was extended in different ways during the following few years in his paintings of gypsy caravans.

By the time Olsen did the portraits of Passmore, Fairweather and Rees, he had moved to a small apartment in Paddington in Sydney. The completed portraits hung well in this intimate space, like the companions they were in his mind. It was a period when he was thinking intently about his origins as an artist and also about ageing, disillusionment and disability in others and self. Undoubtedly the most autobiographical drawing of the series was his portrait of his early mentor and teacher, John Passmore (see fig.3). This work, and the complexity of their relationship, is explored earlier in this thesis in relation to Olsen's years at the Julian Ashton Art School. One critic observed that 'artistic fathers are much like real ones, for they endow one in such a way that it takes a lifetime to unravel their legacy'.[461] It is also true that, as is the case with real parents, one is often more loving and also more critical of them than of others. Olsen was undeniably indebted to Passmore, but in a recent interview revealed:

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[459] Nancy Kasprzycki, 'The Man Who Loves Pictures: A Portrait of John Olsen', article sent to the author, 1991.
[460] Diane Waldman, *Mark Rothko: A Retrospective*, Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1978.
[461] Gary Catalano, *Age*, 11 May, 1988.

Ian Fairweather at work in his hut on Bribie Island, 1962.
Original photograph courtesy of Queensland Newspapers

John Olsen has retained an admiration for Fairweather over many years, learning from his use of imagery - bridging the gap between the figurative and abstract - and sharing his interest in drawing with the brush.

> Passmore brought this element of sin into it, with his idea that if a work comes too easily, then it is not good. So I feel guilty unless I am forever struggling with my work...I never show this side of myself to the world...The inner suffering...the immense internal struggle, it rips the guts out of you.[462]

The powerful psychological hold that Passmore had over many of his students has been substantiated by other artists but in a sense it was this internal struggle that had provided Olsen with the tension to endeavour to push his work further. Many times in the past he had noted how vital his early training under Passmore had been, both in relation to the drawing classes and the notion of process, as well as in providing him with a sense of an artistic tradition and a firm foundation – so that when he took risks he also had an underlying understanding of fundamental artistic principles.

Passmore didn't allow many artists into his Pantheon but, like Olsen and most artists in the 1950s, he had a high regard for Ian Fairweather. In Olsen's drawing of Fairweather, the vigorous ink and gouache lines which describe his beard and hair, and the concentrated expression of his eyes in shadow, convey the feeling of an independent and intense spirit. Olsen shared Fairweather's interests in process and Oriental calligraphy, and the belief that 'pure abstraction is throwing the baby out with the bath water'. The extent of Olsen's admiration for Fairweather in the 1960s was attested to by Robert Hughes, who recalled: 'I can remember John proposing that we carry Fairweather's *Monastery* through the streets of Sydney, as the Cimabues and Duccios had been paraded in Florence in the trecento'.[463]

These portraits, *Letters to a Young Artist*, were exhibited in Olsen's 'Encounters with Drawing' show, first at the Wollongong City Gallery at the end of 1987 and subsequently at Australian Galleries in Melbourne in 1988.

The period Olsen spent in Sydney was a difficult one when he was endeavouring to come to terms with the changes occurring in his personal life and with a sense of loss after leaving Clarendon. However, he re-established closer contact with his children and with a number of Sydney artists including John Coburn, Judy Cassab and Colin Lanceley. By early 1988, with the support of a few close friends, he gradually began to feel restored within himself. He re-explored the places where he had spent his youth, going for walks along Bondi beach and visiting Gerringong on the New South Wales south coast where Lloyd Rees had painted and where he now

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462 Kasprzycki, op.cit.
463 See Geoffrey Dutton, *The Innovators*, op.cit., pp.191, 192.

delighted in investigating the beautiful rock pools. His impressions of sea, sun and shifting tides over encrusted pools filtered through into the subjects of his Darling Harbour mural. In his journal he wrote: 'The mural represents a doorway to my re-birth'. However, there was another doorway he was anxious to enter; one that would take him into 'a deeper more introverted world'.

fig.76 *Degas in old age I* 1986, charcoal and pastel on paper, 47 x 40cm
Private collection

fig.77 *Degas in old age II* 1986, charcoal and pastel, 80.3 x 51.5cm.
Collection: Geelong Art Gallery. Gift of Arthur Boyd in memory of his father Merric Boyd

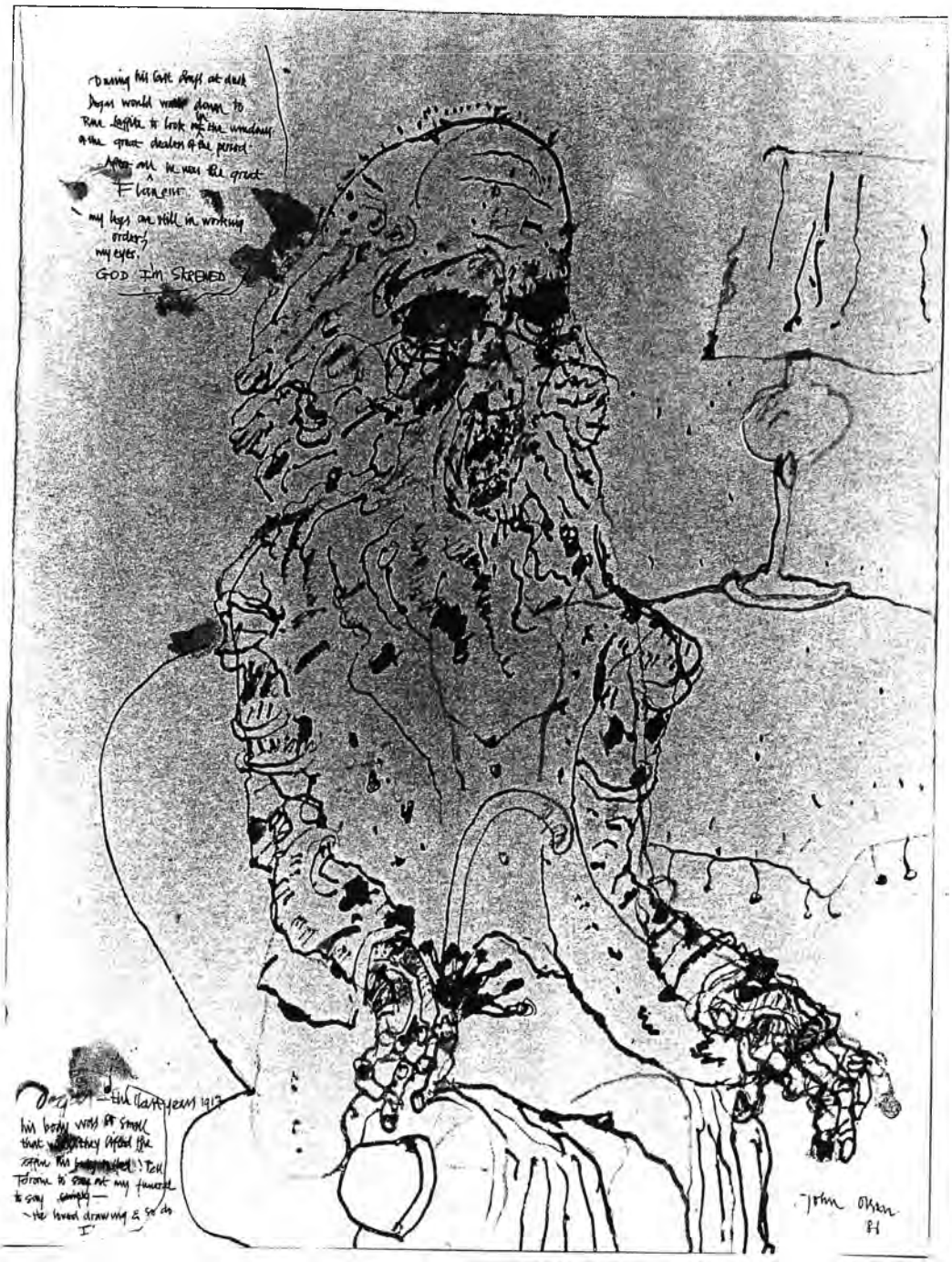

fig.78 *Degas - the last years* 1986, ink and wash on paper, 76 x 57cm. Private Collection

During his last days at dusk Degas would walk down Rue Lafitte to look in the windows of the great dealers of the period. After all, he was the great Flaneur. 'My legs are still in working order, my eyes? GOD I'M SCREWED'.

His body was so small that when they lifted the coffin his body rolled. 'Tell Forain to say at my funeral, to say simply - "He loved drawing and so do I"'.

fig.79 *Renoir I* 1986, ink and wash on paper, 76 x 53cm. Private collection

But soon Renoir was immobilized by his illness - and had to be carried by stretcher up to his studio. His brushes were prepared for him and placed on his lap. Renoir would become engrossed in his painting and forget the grief and loneliness and worry that the death of his wife and the call up of his sons were causing him.

In December 1919 he asked for his brushes and palette - he worked on a flower piece that reflected none of his pain. He put down his brushes after a time - lay back on the pillow, sighed and said 'I think I'm beginning to learn something now'. A few hours afterwards he died.

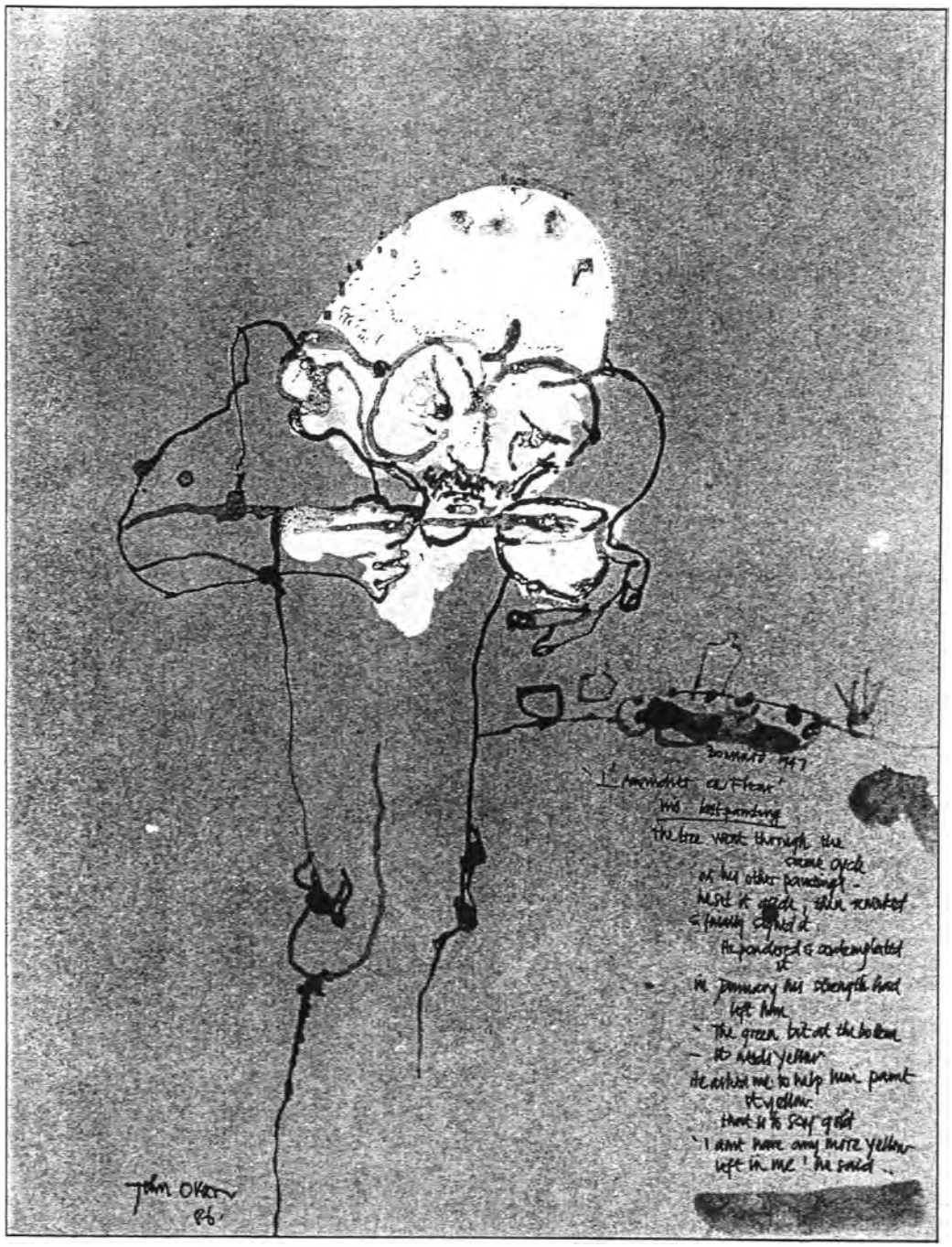

fig.80 *BonnardII* 1986, ink and gouache on paper, 60 x 45cm. Private collection

'L'Amendier en Fleur', <u>his last painting</u>.

The tree went through the same cycle as his other paintings - he set it aside, then reworked and finally signed it.

He pondered and contemplated it. In January his strength left him. 'The green bit at the bottom - it needs yellow'. He asked me to help him paint it yellow, that is to say gold. 'I don't have any more yellow left in me', he said...

fig.81 *Giacometti I* 1987, ink and wash on paper, 44 x 53cm. Private collection

fig.82 *De Kooning* 1987, ink on paper, 77 x 40cm. Collection of the artist

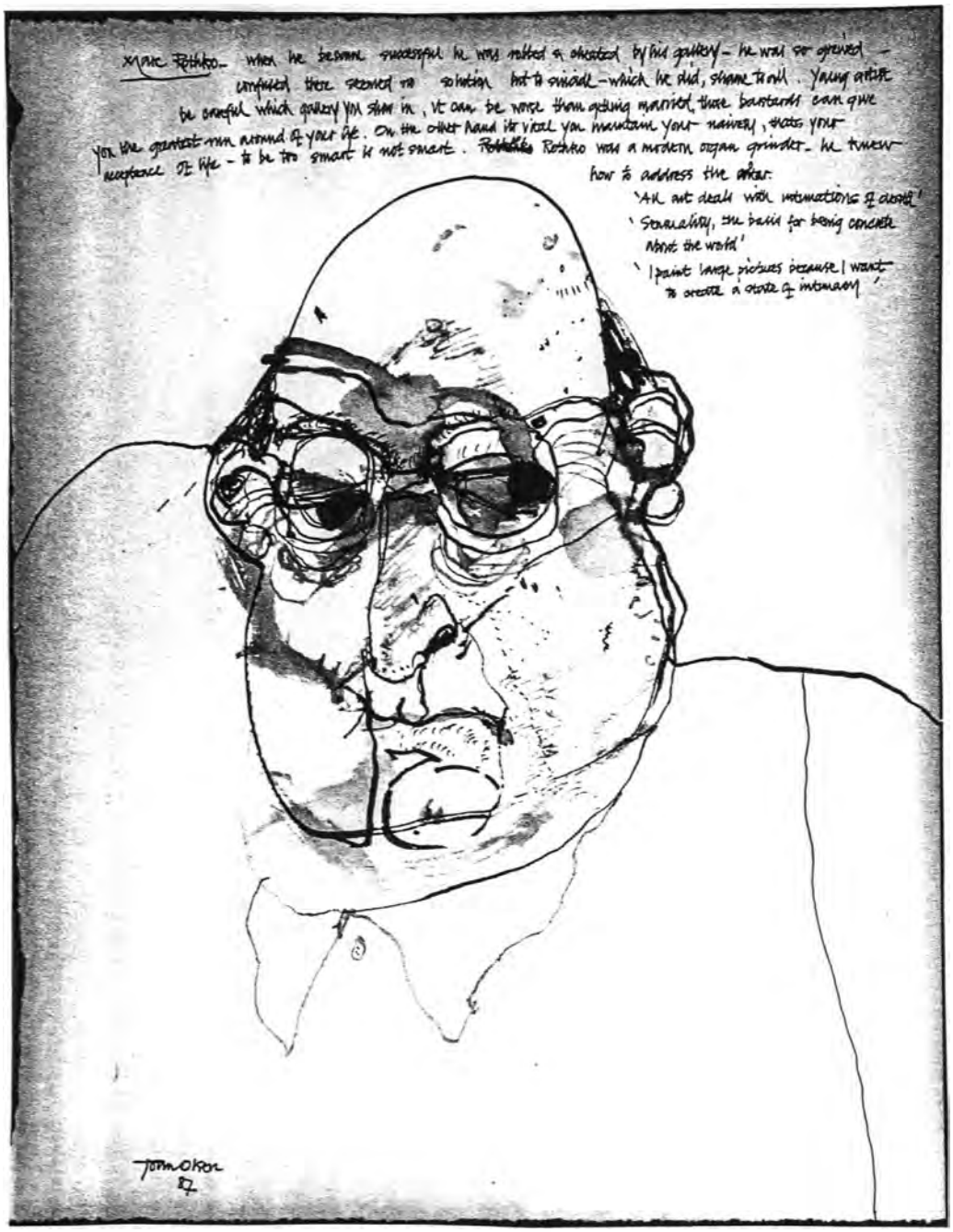

fig.83 *Mark Rothko* 1987, ink and wash on paper, 63 x 70cm. Private collection

Mark Rothko - When he became successful he was robbed & cheated by his gallery - he was so grieved - confused there seemed no solution but to suicide - which he did, shame to all. Young artist be careful which gallery you show in, it can be worse than getting married, those bastards can give you the run around of your life. On the other hand its vital to maintain your naivety, that's your acceptance of life - to be too smart is not smart...Rothko was the modern organ grinder - he knew how to address the altar.
'All art deals with intimations of death' / 'Sensuality, the basis for being concrete about the world'/
'I paint large picture because I want to create a state of intimacy'.

fig.84 *IanFairweather* 1987, ink and wash on paper, 76 x 56cm. Private collection

Dear young artist, Matisse once said - 'silence and isolation are useful. Only superficial painters need fear them'. Fairweather, the 'moon and sixpence man' never did that; in search for your own way, where in your early years you are led to identify with your own age group you should not forget - cultivate your tiny idea.

You may think art is a gentle occupation - believe me it is not - it's just as rough and tumble as everything else, however, Ian was different - when I met Fairweather, he gave the impression he was not only a man, he could be a bird, a rock wallaby or one of those mosquitoes - millions of them that sheltered themselves in the spindly native pines.

The breakthrough - his love and understanding of oriental calligraphy - not abstract but ideographic. Life as it is written - nature as it is written.

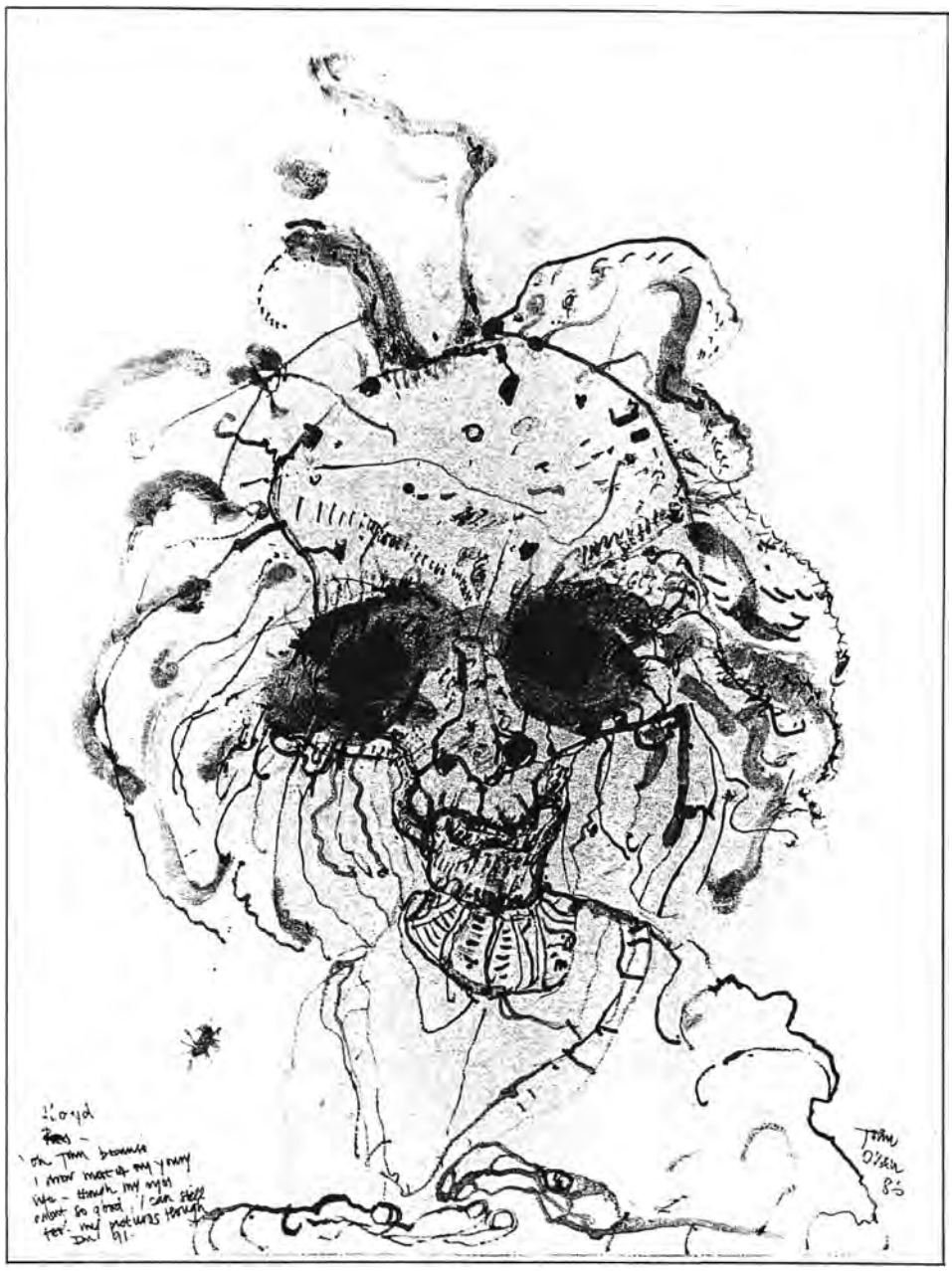

fig.85 *Lloyd Rees* 1986, ink and wash on paper, 76 x 57cm
Private collection

'Oh John, because I drew most of my young life - though my eyes are not so good, I can still feel my pictures though I'm 91.'

CHAPTER 13

THE CIRCUS ANIMALS' DESERTION

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweeping of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now the ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

W.B. Yeats[464]

I would know my shadow and my light, so at last shall I be whole.

Michael Tippett[465]

In the late 1980s Olsen's 'circus animals', those recurring themes and symbols 'you use to twist and shape and craft with', were, as they had always been, continually in a state of flux; moving, regrouping and evolving. Yet during these concluding years of the decade, he also revealed instances of an ever-more probing spirit of enquiry into human nature, narrative and self, as well as into the rich ballast of a Spanish tradition, resulting in the depth and maturity of experience in his paintings and drawings that he had been searching for.

The year 1988 was one of transition for Olsen, in the course of which he moved to the Blue Mountains to live with Katharine Howard, whom he married in January 1989. 'Falls House' in Wentworth Falls was, as Katharine described it, 'a gingerbread, fairytale home, nestled into its own green barrier against the busy world outside'. During the year a studio was being built on the property for Olsen to work in and while this was taking place he painted for part of that time in a small space in Katoomba. In August he wrote in his journal:

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464 W.B. Yeats, *The Circus Animals' Desertion*, see *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, Third Edition, op.cit., p.895.

465 See Andrew Ford's article on the composer Michael Tippett, 'Music with an Ear for Humanity', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 April 1990. Quoted from Tippett's first libretto, *A Child of Our Time*, 1940.

> The studio at Falls Road continues to be built. It's on my dear friend's property. It has been a difficult year emotionally and for my work – only a couple of oils and a few gouaches to show for it... Katharine Howard has been kind & generous to me, she is elegant and intelligent...and her interest in cooking matches mine. Like the studio my life is building.

Although, prior to the completion of his studio, Olsen found it difficult to adjust in his work to the atmosphere of the Blue Mountains, this prompted him to look towards a more internalised world. *Donde Vas? (Where are you going?)* (pl.126) is a gentle, contemplative enquiry set against his recent memories of Sydney Harbour. The broadly painted horizontal areas and muted, subtle tonalities recall some of Richard Diebenkorn's work which Olsen was interested in at the time.[466] However, the delicate, scrawly figurative and abstract notations have an independent vitality. Repeated curving lines descend the pliable steps in arcs, seeking out tenuous paths and hypothetical equations from one point to the next, and link the curious, small face with the blurred lettering, 'Donde Vas?'.

Donde Voy? [Where am I going?] *Self-Portraits in Moments of Doubt*, 1989 (pl.127) stands alongside *Spanish Encounter* as a major turning point in Olsen's art. It is a difficult and complex work requiring close consideration. The two paintings afford a startling comparison in relation to the emotional and painterly distance Olsen had travelled. The early work is the expressionist blow between the eyes – direct, unqualified, unrepentant, full of youthful vigour and impetuosity and painted in five hours; the later work is more introspective – multilayered in its references and in its paint surface, rich in tonal mutation, worked on and nurtured over many months. Whereas the association with Spain was initially relayed through the stark contrast of black on white, Olsen was now looking more towards the colouration of Goya, Velasquez and Zurbarán.

Donde Voy? Self-Portraits in Moments of Doubt investigates the notion of what portraiture might be, not only in relation to physical resemblance but to the internal world of feeling, memory, intellect and imagination; also alluding to the many sides of self. The mood is set by the rich brown and black underpainting. It has a peculiar psychic quality of doubt – sombre, mellow, dark and brooding – 'reflecting on life and human relationships'. Conscious and subconscious associations merge.

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466 Olsen discussed his interest in this American painter (b.1922) with the author a short time prior to painting *Donde Vas?*. Diebenkorn's paintings of the mid-1950s included figures and a mood of quiet isolation, although his later work generally moved towards an abstract conception. It was this artist's pictorial construction, his lyric sensibility and subtle manipulation of the paint surface that Olsen admired.

The portrait on the left is built up of overlapping thick and feathery strokes, while fine, spidery lines become the arms trailing down. He looks outward, but enclosed within the web of marks is an 'inner eye'. A small head only just outside of himself looks inward and is in turn attached to an additional portrait facing the other way. Around him are numbers and letters, inspired by the cover of Stephen Hawking's book *A Brief History of Time,*[467] where equations float 'like modern alchemy'. Out of the darkness shines a beautifully painted small egg, after Velasquez's *An Old Woman Cooking Eggs* c.1618. Olsen recalls: 'I had a dream about it. The painting had been standing there for three months and suddenly I had the answer. I just went up to it and carefully painted this egg in the "belle metier". It became the universe'.

In the opposite, left-hand section, his self-portrait is looking across, as in a deflected mirror, at another side of self. The faces do not communicate but exist within themselves. Here he is linked with the resonant yellow-ochre ground of the upper area, which is the disparate dreamworld of the mind. The idea originated from Goya's notion: 'The imagination abandoned by reason generates improbable monsters; added to this, it becomes mother to the arts and the fount of every marvel'.[468] On the left, a little figure wearing the penitent's hat appears to be riding a bicycle, while on the edge of the picture plane is his 'Goya's Dog', poised on a line which swings down to a shoe, repeatedly descending into the darkened area. While still working on the painting Olsen wrote in a letter to the author:

> I'm reading Samuel Beckett's book 'Stirring Still'. As coincidence would have it, it corresponds very much to my intentions in 'Donde Vas?'...or the big painting which I am looking at now, which has the working title 'Self-Portrait in the Spanish Manner' [*Donde Voy*]. The seeking to assure itself of its own existence, hence a lot of toing and froing – looks at itself; looks away from itself and patters frantically (hence the shoes) lest it falls into silence and non being.

Olsen worked on several dark portraits during 1989, including an oil, *Self-Portrait with Velasquez Egg*, and the gouache and watercolour, *Self-Portrait with Egg* (pl.128), painted around the same time as *Donde Voy? Self-Portraits in Moments of*

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467 Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, Bantam Press, London, 1988. Olsen had long been interested in Einstein's theory of relativity and was stimulated by Hawking's insights. The philosophical questions Hawkings tackled such as 'What do we know about the universe and where is it going?' correspond in an oblique way with the spirit of enquiry in *Donde Voy? Self-Portraits in Moments of Doubt.*

468 See Xavier de Salas, *Goya*, English translation by Arnoldo Mondadori, Milan. English edition published by Bay Books, Sydney, 1979, p.67. This quote was inscribed on the opening etching for Goya's *Dreams* series, in which the artist is depicted asleep at his table, 'surrounded by monsters conjured up by his imagination'.

Doubt. The gouache and watercolour is one of the most penetrating, in which he goes beyond external, physical appearance into a more unconscious realm of self. Virtually all references to his dynamic, calligraphic line have been abandoned and the focus rests on the head, painted in flesh tones, but cavernous like a skeletal question mark standing out against the deep brown washes of paint. This work was later exhibited at Australian Galleries in Sydney,[469] but at the time it was painted Olsen felt disconcerted by the strangeness and frankness of this investigation:

> It's like something to do with my own psyche. The head is like a skull and the probing of it frightened me. I put it in a folder and tucked it away. It was only just before I sent everything down to Sydney that I was able to face up to it. Probably because I was removed from it.

Yet in all the dark portraits there is a positive dimension – the egg. That recurring symbol of life, regeneration and hope is ever-present. There had also been the growing recognition, for Olsen, that through the exposure of self-doubt, vulnerability and internal struggle comes another kind of strength. This idea had begun to emerge in some of his portraits of other artists and involved having the courage to make something more than a superficial judgement of self or other people. For many years Olsen had valued the insights into human existence provided by some of the great self-portraits undertaken by artists in old age:

> In the work of Goya for example, or Rembrandt where he's lost and he peers out from the canvas like a wrinkled raisin and it's a confronting thing. And what is contained in the picture is so much about an understanding and feeling and true humanity that it's a triumph. Because he has been through everything and somehow come out the other end of it. Human beings understand that. It's like life isn't walking from peak to peak, life is to break through to the valleys.[470]

During the first few months of 1989 Olsen had begun to settle into and enjoy the atmosphere of his new studio at Wentworth Falls: 'The studio is working beyond my expectations, the sky is clotted with clouds and ripe pears hang over the tin roof which either plop!...or are eaten by currawongs and crimson rosellas'. He began working tenaciously towards an exhibition to be held at Australian Galleries in Sydney the following year and was painting with renewed vigour on a wide range of themes: Sydney Harbour remembered in its juicy-fruit vitality, gouaches and

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469 A number of artists, including Ann Thomson, commented to me at this time on how extrardinary they found this work to be in the context of Olsen's development.
470 Olsen, interview with the author.

watercolours of the *Potter's Studio* recalling his experiences working with the ceramicist, Robert Mair, and the revitalisation of the frog, fish and lily pond. He was also painting several large canvases based on themes derived from poetry, as in Yeats's *The Second Coming*, and narrative, as in the cumulative, vibrant work *Jean de Florette* (pl.129).

In 1987 Olsen had seen the film, *Jean de Florette* (based on Marcel Pagnol's novel)[471] and the breathtaking cinematography which so vividly captured the Provencal landscape, as well as the moving story of human passions and deceptions, had deeply impressed him. By the time he was working on this theme, he had read the book and was also listening to the sound-track of the music from the film, which had been given to him by his daughter, Louise, for his sixty-first birthday in January 1989.

Jean de Florette tells a compelling story of an elemental struggle for human survival in the face of greed. It is about a romantic, city-bred hunchback who moves to the country with his wife and daughter in the hope of living out a dream to be in close communion with nature. When they arrive they find 'Zola's paradise', 'beautiful dog roses', inextricable olive trees and arborescent rosemary bushes.[472] Florette aims to work hard to make his idealistic aspirations for himself and his family come true, but their neighbours, the village patriarch and his nephew, Ugolin, want the property for themselves in order to grow endless red carnations and make their worldly wealth and fortune. They surreptitiously block the spring on the property, the one and only source of water and, ultimately, life. This results in Florette's steady and agonising decline as he is forced to trudge for miles under the blazing sun with barrels strapped to his back in search of water from a distant spring.

In his painting, Olsen emphasises the importance of the spring rushing out of pipes – the elusive answer to Jean de Florette's dream – in the top half of the composition, the space around contradicting the busy, chaotic world below. Florette is wearing the penitent's hat, the symbol of his suffering as a result of avaricious individuals. Olsen noted that this kind of 'dunce's cap' was associated with the Spanish Inquisition and the Cultural Revolution in China: 'I'm sure it goes back to the beginning of man as a social animal. The Chinese and Europeans selected a pointed cap for those who were the outcasts. Once he's wearing it, he knows he is gone'. Dotted throughout the canvas, a mass of seemingly benign, small, red carnations are

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471 Marcel Pagnol, *Jean de Florette & Manon of the Springs*, English translation and translator's note by W. E. Heyningen, André Deutsch, London, 1988.
472 ibid., p.66.

the equivalent of the scorpion alongside the heart. The large rabbit signifies Florette's idea of breeding these gregarious mammals, while the pail and watering-can symbolise the search for water. As Olsen noted at the time, this painting is 'the primitive beat of drums and watering-cans'.

Olsen's continuing interest in narrative and in the juxtaposition of the dreamworld against the real one was revealed in his painting, *Don Quixote Enters the Inn* (pl.130). He was stimulated by the humour and pathos of Cervantes's Don Quixote, a deluded adventurer living in a world of dreams, who saw himself as a chivalrous knight errant. When Cervantes's celebrated text was published in 1605, there had been no knights errant for centuries, and Spanish soldiers were engaged in bloodthirsty colonial conquests, making 'the Don's own ideal but mad knighthood most profoundly and mysteriously moving'.[473]

In *Don Quixote Enters the Inn* Olsen depicts the main protagonist, 'the hero', not as one of the large, dominant figures, but as a mass of nervous, squiggly lines and marks at the top of the painting, like a chimera of his own wild imagination. His spear, which appears equally improbable in its insubstantial weight, almost touches the head of his loyal companion, Sancho Panza, alongside the 'bonebag of a horse, Rosinante' (Don Quixote's noble steed) and a rapacious looking inn keeper (the governor of the castle 'Sir Castellan'). While the bright, sunny, upper section of the painting is connected with Quixote's dreamworld, the dark-brown lower section represents the real world of the grimy, run-down inn where the 'worst cooked' codfish and mouldy bread are the meagre substance of Quixote's 'banquet', heightened by the white of an empty plate. In the middle of the bare outline of a table lies a tiny encircled egg, the symbol of life; again, a reminder that even in the meanest circumstance there is a glimmer of hope, albeit in the world of the imagination. In 1958 Olsen had quoted Eugene O'Neill in his journal:

> Tragedy has the meaning the Greeks gave it. To them it brought exaltation and an urge towards life and ever more life...It is the dream that keeps us fighting, willing, living.

There is a striking continuity of philosophical concerns expressed in Olsen's journal of the late 1950s and those underpinning his works in the 1980s. It was as though he had set up a hypothetical framework of ideas that had evolved and deepened over the years. Since his early visit to Spain he had been greatly impressed by Lorca's

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[473] Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *The Adventures of Don Quixote*, English translation by J.M. Cohen, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1950.

poetry, particularly the 'Gypsy Ballads', which he described as the 'art of a somnambulist'. To grasp the full implications of Olsen's *Gypsy Caravan* series, it is necessary to understand Lorca's notion of the gypsy. Lorca said that being born in Granada gave him a feeling for the oppressed people of his country and, among them, none were more significant than the gypsy. Of these outcasts from society Lorca wrote:

> The gypsy is the loftiest, most profound and aristocratic element of my country, the most representative of its mode, the very keeper of the glowing embers, the blood, and alphabet of Andalusian and universal truth.[474]

For Olsen, the gypsy caravan, in his gouaches and large oil painting, *Beckett Joins the Gypsy Caravan* (pl.131), became the ultimate symbol of creative and spiritual liberation:

> Lorca adored gypsies and he thought they were the real poets of Spain. They were the outsiders. To be on the gypsy caravan is freedom, it is independence from all those who want to dominate us. It is about not conforming to the pressures of society; there are no frontiers. You have to qualify in these categories to get on board. And it's a Spanish thing to be on the gypsy caravan. On that level it is very high.[475]

In December 1987, Olsen had again returned to Spain, visiting the grave of the poet and author, Robert Graves, whom he had befriended and whose sixty-fourth birthday he had celebrated in Deya almost three decades before. In a work on paper, *Gypsy Caravan I*, he included a small, thinly painted portrait of Graves on the dark caravan which, in its formal, square shape, echoed the cart and altar in his 1960 paintings relating to Spain, such as *The Procession* (pl.24). Inscribed above Graves's portrait is the notation: 'Don't say anything more, eat your eggs & move on. The bureaucrats arrive this morning'.

This same square format recurs in *Beckett joins the Gypsy Caravan* (fig.86), only here, the sense of the caravan as the vehicle for the journey has become more explicit and dynamic. The stillness of Beckett in the centre contradicts the vigorous drawing of the 'fools', depicted as comical characters clambering to get on board. Although Olsen's attitude to life is generally more optimistic and life-affirming than

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474 Federico Garcia Lorca, *Deep Song and Other Prose*, edited and translated by Christopher Maurer, New Directions, New York, 1980, p.105.
475 Olsen, interview with the author.

Beckett's existential conception of the world, commonalities occur in the blurring of the boundaries between the conscious and unconscious, the normal and the absurd. It was Beckett's penetrating insights into the tragi-comic nature of human existence that afford him a place on the gypsy caravan.

In Olsen's major oil painting, *Beckett Joins the Gypsy Caravan* (pl.131), Beckett is depicted alongside Goya in another caravan. It is the Spanish artist's humanity, his struggle with the ever-luring pressures of society and the enduring legacy of his work that afford him the stature of Lorca's gypsy. Olsen also noted that he had been reading about Goya and looking at his self-portraits:

> The portrait of Goya from the period when he is afflicted with deafness...He goes to the house of the deaf and is involved with a woman who is a tyrant and dominates him and in his own self-portrait his glasses are hanging off his nose. It is that time...and his work is his independence.

Beckett and Goya are painted with sensuous, expressive brushmarks over the dark ground. They are on the journey to freedom, while all around them along the edges are the signs of the chaotic, temporal world – bizarre faces, dogs, rodents and swirling lines and dots – applied with characteristic ebullience. The array of pots, saucepans and other implements, recalling *El Amoladar*, is the accumulated baggage of life that one can almost hear clattering and clanking along the road.

Olsen's own peripatetic life was continuing. Ever the traveller, in March 1990 he was again packing up his possessions and moving on. Early in the year, John and Katharine Olsen had discovered Chapel House Farm, a beautiful, rambling country property set in gently rolling hills at Rydal. The house combines an old coach inn built in 1831 and a Federation-style house built by the Franciscans in 1920 as a seminary. Katharine Olsen, who had grown up in the country in Victoria, had plans to create extensive gardens and to run the property as a farm. Before long there were horses in the stables, cattle grazing on the hills, and ducks, chickens and geese waddling around the paddocks. A variety of trees, shrubs and flowers were planted and around the side of the house a fragrant herb garden was nurtured. Across from the house there is a large studio space with long windows on three sides letting in light and views of the surrounding countryside. Soon after their arrival Olsen noted in his journal:

> Chapel House Farm, Rydal. This positions me for my final work... The landscape is not unlike my beloved Clarendon in South

> Australia. A pleasant surprise – good, friendly working class people. Clouds hushing over, afternoons of long shadows, different small birds, fly catchers.

In April 1990, the results of the previous year's work were exhibited at the recently established Australian Galleries premises in Sydney. Over the past decade the majority of his exhibitions had been held in Melbourne and Adelaide and this show was his first in Sydney for nine years.[476] After the works had been delivered, Olsen noted: 'Here I go, public again...I wouldn't say it's perfect but it's mine'. It was a large show and included, among the forty-two works, his major paintings, *Jean de Florette* and *Beckett Joins the Gypsy Caravan*, and two dark self-portraits. The exhibition was generally considered a considerable show of strength, as John McDonald acknowledged in the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

> Olsen's new exhibition is a lively, engaging and often moving event. The diaristic, autobiographical overtones have never been so prominent, while the landscapes work as convincing metaphors for personal feeling.
>
> They are not exactly attractive paintings, they are altogether too busy, too chaotic and energetic to allow the eye to linger over any part of the picture plane. Yet that restlessness in itself is seductively and refreshingly human.[477]

After the considerable effort and energy he had applied to his work over the previous twelve months and the strain of moving yet again, Olsen felt quite exhausted. He spent time over the following few months organising his studio and working on a reduced, intimate scale on drawings and prints, including a series of soft-ground and aquatint etchings in small editions with his friend, the printmaker, Max Miller.

Winter in Rydal in 1990 was the coldest it had been for many years. Bitter winds and sleet swept across the landscape during July and August and, for a time, snow lay thickly carpeted on the ground. It was an arduous time when the property became difficult to manage. However, as if in direct contrast to the surrounding atmosphere, Olsen worked in his studio, warmed by a gas heater, on a number of radiant watercolour, gouache and pastel drawings.

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476 Olsen's previous show in Sydney was held at Barry Stern Gallery in October 1981. The works included in the exhibition were used to illustrate a book by Ivan Smith, *A Sliver of Time*, Harper & Row, Sydney, 1981.

477 John McDonald, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 April 1990, p.82.

In July he wrote in his journal: 'Silence. Putting colours – often not more than three or four – alongside each other, adjusting the relationship until they begin to sing. Singing is a very personal exercise'. Amidst pools of sea-greens and blues and iridescent crimson in *Boys chasing crabs* (pl.132), spidery crabs, swimming frogs, octopus tentacles and faces and figures emerge. This was Olsen's recollection of his experiences as a young boy chasing crabs along the beach at Bondi and an expression of his continuing affection for the life-enhancing, nourishing power of the sea and water. Conversely, another striking work, *An old Gardener bidding his flowers farewell* (pl.133), was a reminder of the transitory, peripatetic nature of his life and his dreamworld over the years. Both are personal but the messages are universal.

A visit to Olsen's studio at Chapel House Farm late in the summer of 1990 revealed many recurrent preoccupations that had been evolving over the years, as well as his more recent interest in darker tones and a ruminating, carefully considered response to the act of painting. Scattered on the floor and pinned to boards on the walls were dynamic linear drawings of animals that recalled a journey to Africa the previous year and a visit to the Adelaide zoo in October 1990. On an easel was a landscape in progress, inspired by the surrounding rolling hills clotted with the occasional dam. On another easel was a sombre, resonant oil, *Fish Head and Baptism Spoon* (pl.134). Olsen had long enjoyed looking at a wide range of art and in recent times had been intently considering the still lifes of artists like Chardin, together with the 'darkened pools' of Rembrandt and Goya. The meticulously painted head of a fish (purchased from the local markets), paint thinly applied and delicately layered, stands out against the deep brown ground, above the fleshy strokes of a prawn. A tiny christening spoon resides in an open drawer on the right, while a few small mushrooms float in space. As ever in Olsen's output there is a sense of the unpredictable, but now it is filtered and distilled, creating a mysterious presence.

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On 31 October 1991 the John Olsen Retrospective opened at the National Gallery of Victoria, later travelling to the Art Gallery of New South Wales where it commenced on 2 May 1992. It was a timely opportunity to pay tribute and to recognise the breadth of Olsen's contribution to the art of this country.[478]

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[478] The Retrospective is discussed in the Epilogue of this thesis.

In overview, John Olsen has contributed an oeuvre of considerable vitality and diversity to Australian art. His work defies rigid classification and instead invites the viewer into a world that is fecund, cumulative and continually evolving. As he noted: 'My work tells a story. But the picture is bigger than the story. The story is the beginning of the conclusion'.[479]

On one level, John Olsen's art has often been about the unexpected; challenging our notions about the world outside and inside ourselves. Yet his search for the new, for the surprise, has always existed within the framework of a tradition of painting and drawing which, together with his intense feeling for place, poetry and the natural world, has provided him with the basis from which to engage upon a continually evolving, transformative process in his work.

Olsen's art is, in effect, like an ever-increasing web of connections. His passion for the act of painting and drawing with brush has been a constant factor in his work throughout his life, inviting the viewer to embark on journeys of experience and discovery. The overlapping threads of dream, imagination and reality are interwoven in a densely cumulative world, continually endeavouring to establish the linkages which provide an underlying unity out of disparity. Multiplicities abound, the inveterate curiosity of the man remains undiminished. In the later work, his insights into the realms of human experience have become increasingly profound. There are no easy solutions; the journey is paramount and the elements of risk, intuition and surprise are ever present.

John Olsen is an artist who, throughout his life, has been searching, probing and enquiring into a world that is constantly in a state of flux; perpetually as irrational, invigorating and challenging as his own artistic life has always been.

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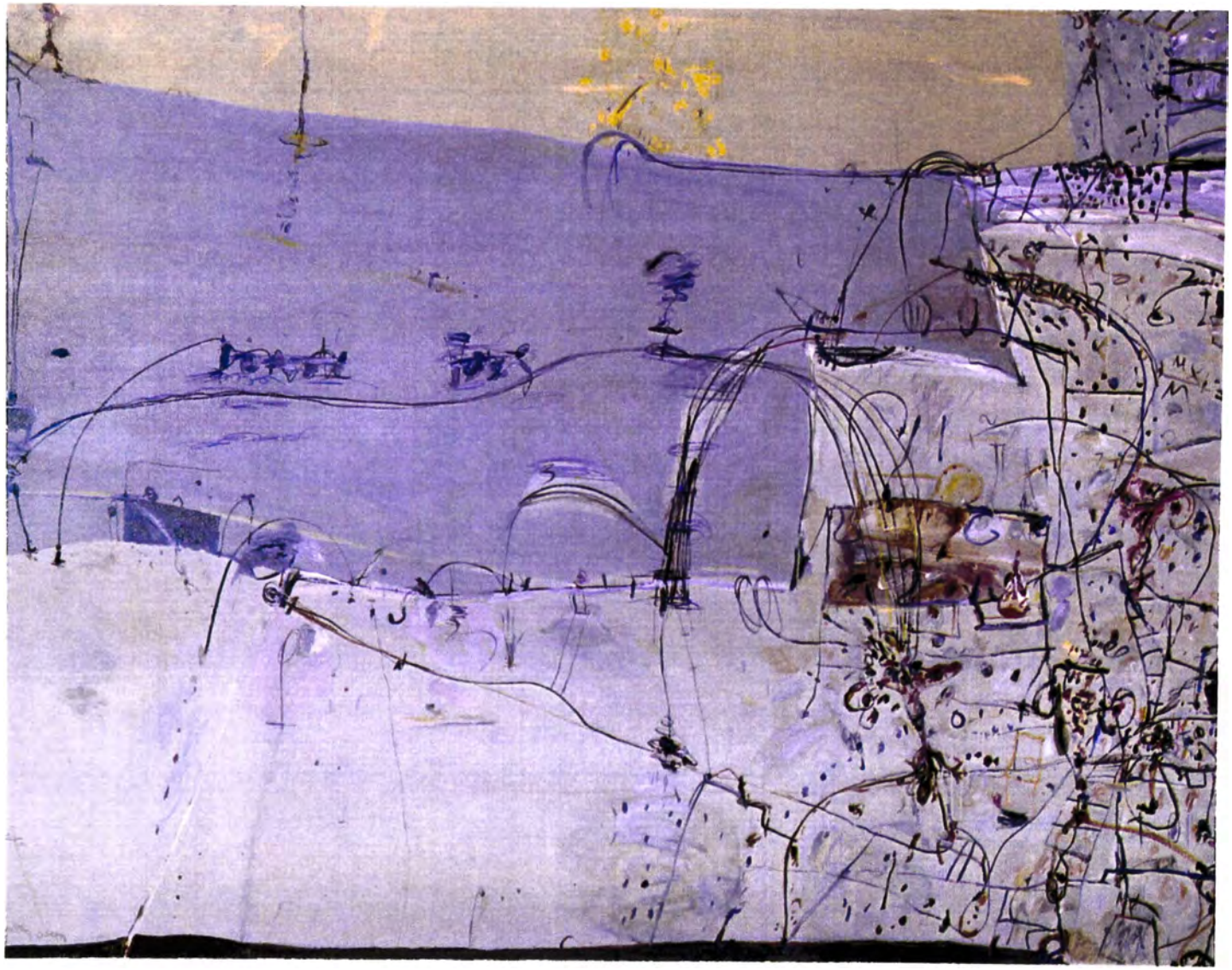
[479] Interview with Nancy Kaspryzicki, 'The Man Who Loves Pictures'; sent to the author, 1991.

fig.86 *Beckett joins the Gypsy Caravan* 1990,
watercolour, gouache, pastel on paper, 99 x 94cm. Collection: Mr. and Mrs. Saxon

fig.87 Diego Velasquez, *An Old Woman Cooking Eggs* 1618, oil on canvas, 99 x 117cm
Collection: National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh

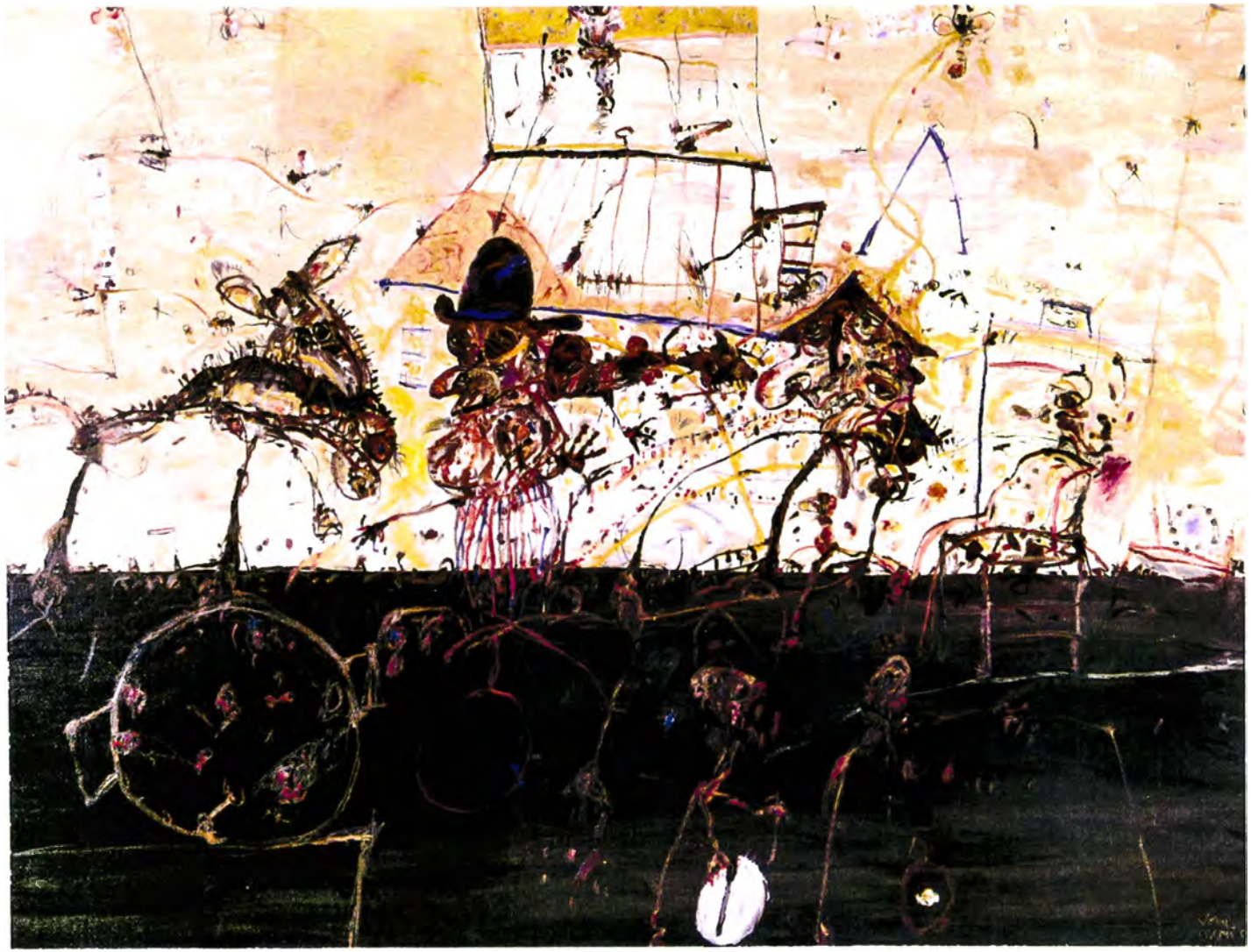


pl.126 *Donde Vas? (Where are you going?)* 1989, oil on canvas, 167 x 213cm. Private collection

pl.127 *Donde Voy? Self-Portraits in Moments of Doubt* 1989, oil on canvas (two sections), 183 x 366cm. Collection of the artist

pl.128 *Self-Portrait with Egg* 1990,
watercolour and gouache, 186 x 100cm
Collection: Australian Galleries

pl.129 *Jean de Florette* 1989, oil on canvas, 183 x 244cm. Collection: Australian Galleries



pl.130 *Don Quixote Enters the Inn* 1989, oil on canvas, 183 x 244cm. Collection: Mr and Mrs Saxon

pl.131 *Beckett Joins the Gypsy Caravan* 1990, oil on canvas, 183 x 244cm. Private collection

pl.132 *Boys chasing crabs* 1990, gouache, watercolour and pastel on paper, 90.5 x 99.5cm. Collection: Mr. Ian Pollard

pl.133 *An old Gardener bidding his flowers farewell* 1990, gouache, watercolour and pastel on paper, 95 x 99.5cm Collection Dr. Choong Koon Lai and Mrs Ee-Lynn Lai

pl.134 *Fish Head and Baptism Spoon* 1990, oil on canvas, 137 x 151.5cm
Collection of the artist

EPILOGUE

THE JOHN OLSEN RETROSPECTIVE

Introduction: The process of working on the Retrospective

In late February 1990 I was invited by James Mollison, then director of the National Gallery of Victoria, to be Guest Curator of the John Olsen Retrospective exhibition. This was the first of five retrospectives of the work of major Australian artists proposed by the National Gallery of Victoria. [480]

The invitation to curate the retrospective came about due to the work I had already undertaken on Olsen's art over previous years. In particular, the process of tracing his works in private and public collections from the 1950s to the present, as part of my research for the monograph on the artist, was considered by James Mollison to be a sound basis from which to curate the exhibition.

In summary by the time I was commissioned to take on the role of Guest Curator, I had already written to all State and Regional galleries about their holdings; I had gone through all the available catalogues in commercial galleries and library records and had located works in corporate, university and private collections. I had visited as many of these collections as possible throughout Australia and had progressively accumulated an extensive archival resource through the process of photographing and cataloguing all the works I had seen.

Preliminary discussions about the overall plans for the retrospective between James Mollison and myself occurred in February 1990. It was agreed that a meeting be scheduled for April/ May of that year to discuss the documentation of works that I had located. When I arrived at this meeting, I had with me six large files containing visual and written documentation pertaining to approximately three hundred works. I had made an initial cull of the images but I had assumed that before proceeding too far, I should consult with the director. However, he took one look at me laden with all my material and told me to come back in six weeks with one file only!

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480 These were outlined in the National Gallery of Victoria's sponsorship proposal with Carlton United Breweries (CUB) which referred to five Retrospectives: John Olsen, John Perceval, Arthur Boyd, Charles Blackman and Rosalie Gascoigne.

This was an instructive moment when I realised that it really was my role to give shape to the exhibition. The responsibility of my task was heightened by Mollison's comments that the selection of works for the retrospective and accompanying documentation in the monograph, would be the vehicles through which the art community and public would judge the artist's contribution and reputation. Murray Bail summed this up when he described a retrospective as 'nothing less than a distilled view of an artist's achievement'.[481] At a point when I was embroiled in a great mass of data in my writing, this notion of focus and distillation assisted me in making difficult decisions, both in terms of the monograph and the retrospective, about the considerable amount of material that needed to be omitted.[482] In the exhibition context, considerations of space and the dimensions of the actual works meant an even more rigorous paring down.

Preparations

My first task was to focus on the curatorial rationale for the retrospective. As with a foundation study, the principal aim was to demonstrate John Olsen's contribution to Australian art during the period of some forty years from the 1950s to 1990. However, clearly a number of questions needed to be addressed *specifically* in terms of selecting works for an exhibition. Whereas it was possible to be more expansive in the written documentation of the work, it was necessary in the exhibition context to consider the physicality of the objects; to keep in mind the fact that the works themselves had to tell the story. As the initial purpose for visiting collections and viewing the works had been for the Olsen monograph, I now had to apply myself to re-thinking this experience in terms of the exhibition context. To this end it was necessary to take into account certain basic inter-related considerations:

(a) the scale of the exhibition in terms of the number of works;
(b) the size and nature of the exhibition space in the gallery;
(c) the scale of the individual works in relation to the space;
(d) the juxtaposition of works in terms of the conceptual links and visual impact;
(e) the balance of the selection across the exhibition, ensuring that each period of the artist's development was represented.

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[481] Murray Bail, *Fairweather*, Art and Australia Books in association with the Queensland Art Gallery, 1994, p.11.

[482] As with the monograph many collectors were keen to have their works included on the basis that it would affirm the value and standing of the choices they had made. Unfortunately it was inevitable that some would be disappointed.

Within a framework or structure, the process of curating exhibitions is a very creative experience in which, as in orchestral music or theatre, the parts of the whole have their own integrity yet are inter-connected. In thinking through the John Olsen Retrospective the material available opened up a wide range of possibilities. On one level it was vital to tell the story of the development of the work and to emphasise the artist's major preoccupations over the years. To do this with clarity it was necessary to take a broadly chronological approach. However, on another level, within the chronology it was possible to create thematic groupings, such as works relating to Sydney Harbour across time; or works relating to interior environments undertaken in Portugal and Australia; or the portraits of artists and *Gypsy Caravan* series. In this way I felt that a more lively sense of the interconnections across periods of time and media could be encompassed.

From the inception of the exhibition through to the installation it was important to keep an imaginative drift; to consider ways of drawing the viewer into specific works without losing the momentum of the whole. In addition to conveying the linkages between works and periods, the aim was to provide varied encounters - encapsulating tensions and dramatic moments as well as quiet, interior spaces for contemplation.

How the story and the experience are provided comes through in part in the scale of the exhibition; the number of works selected being very much determined by the nature of the individual artist's output. Initially James Mollison had said to me that he thought the retrospective should consist of about forty works. I am not certain if this figure was arrived at as a way of pushing me to cull material or if this was his initial estimation of a realistic benchmark. Either way, in the light of my recent research it seemed to me to be quite impossible to reveal the development of Olsen's art over some four decades in such a small number of works. While I was struck by the idea of emphasising the strengths, in order to realistically convey the transitions (and there were distinctive shifts from one phase of the work to the next) as well as the high points, further scope was required. After considerable debate a more open approach was admitted.

I felt that a very beneficial aspect of working with the director as a sounding board was that I had to justify the reasons for each and every selection. The result of this process was the agreement that the exhibition should consist of approximately one hundred works. As with the monograph it was agreed that the retrospective should

incorporate a broad spectrum of media including: oil paintings, drawings, prints, watercolours, tapestries and ceramics.

The selection was also partly determined by the exhibition spaces available. Initially an area known as the Murdoch Court was proposed and over a number of weeks I worked with the gallery floorplans. While it would have been possible to hold the retrospective in this space there were a number of difficulties. The space itself is very large, square and open-plan, with several moveable screens, and there is the sense of being able to quite rapidly attain an overview of the whole. While this works very well for some artists or for group exhibitions, in the case of Olsen's work where many of his major paintings are quite vibrant and busy, there was the danger of visual overload and also of the more visually strident works overwhelming the more subtle ones. After several discussions with the director on these points, I felt considerable relief when he led me to the second level of the Gallery and said it would be possible, due to planned refurbishments, to make the more spacious inter-connecting galleries available for the retrospective.

I soon found that I was able to make sense of the selection for the retrospective on the floorplans and although there were inevitable changes to the layout when the works finally arrived at the Gallery, I knew that the exhibition area would be sympathetic to the show as a whole. Although it was still possible to look from the first gallery space through to the end gallery, and although there would inevitably be a sense of overlapping time frames and groupings, I found that this could be used to advantage - maintaining a sense of the flow, while simultaneously creating clear breaks in the overall chronology. In this way it was possible to imaginatively take the viewer on a journey from one stage of Olsen's development to the next, and within this overall structure to enter into areas that dealt with a specific themes. It was also feasible to create some spaces that were enlivened by dramatic, large-scale works and others that were separated (through the use of screens) allowing for more intimate contemplation - so that in a broad sense there was the feeling of a richly textured and varied experience.

During the selection process I consulted with the artist to make sure that he was in agreement about the choices being made. He generally preferred to be kept informed than to intervene, noting that particularly in relation to his early development, he had lost touch with many of the works, while in relation to more recent works he was very close to them. It is not surprising that, probably as with many artists facing the same prospect, he felt in trepidation of confronting a large body of his works over some forty years brought together in the retrospective. 'The works are like

children', he would often say, 'you have to let them go and hope that they will fare well over time.'

Overview of the selection of works for the John Olsen Retrospective

The retrospective aimed to reveal the broad scope of John Olsen's development. In its final conception the show commenced with *Head of a boy*, 1955 and *The Bicycle Boys Rejoice*, 1955, and concluded with the dark self-portrait, *Donde Voy? Self-portraits in Moments of Doubt* and *Beckett joins the Gypsy Caravan*, 1990. Some fascinating parallels revealed themselves in these early and late works; in relation to portraiture in the early painting of the boy's head and the late dark self-portrait, and in the implication of journeying in the *Bicycle Boys* series and the *Gypsy Caravan* series. The latter two series dealt implicitly and explicitly with the idea of momentum, both within the works themselves - the peripatetic line, the restless energy of subject - and across the spectrum of time.[483] Other such dynamics revealed themselves. It was possible, for example, to discern a powerful link between the early and late work by locating the dramatic, seminal painting *Spanish Encounter*, 1960, in the first exhibition space, from which it was possible to look through the next two galleries to the later Spanish works such as *Calle Estrecha*, 1987. In a sense these polarities established the parameters within which the journey through the exhibition would occur.

John Olsen has been very prolific over the years. His willingness to take risks has been both a strength and weakness. This together with the tendency to occasionally spill over into facility, as in his abundant frogs, meant that a watchful eye on quality control was imperative. Being prolific does not, however, necessarily imply works of lesser quality because there were periods when the output was expansive and the standard of many remained very high, whereas there were other stages where some of the works were too exploratory, undisciplined or repetitive. For example, the process differed in selecting from the period of the 1970s when the works were uneven in quality, whereas in relation to the early 1960s and the 1980s there were many more works of a high standard than could possibly be included.

Within the broad chronology the thematic groupings were intended to demonstrate the ways in which Olsen entered into specific ideas and/or geographical locations to reveal external and internal realities. For example with the Sydney Harbour works

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483 This idea - from the *Bicycle Boys* to the *Gypsy Caravans* - was picked up in some of the promotion of the exhibition through discussions with staff of the National Gallery of Victoria.

or the grouping of paintings relating to the *Clarendon Season* series and South Australian landscapes,[484] it was possible to discover aspects of John Olsen's own story in his connections with place, where he was living or travelling to, and how this affected him in terms of states of mind, feeling and physical experience. In relation to considering the audience,[485] I believed that it was important to encourage viewers moving through the exhibition to explore individual works in microcosm and macrocosm; just as the overall exhibition it was hoped that specific groupings would draw people in to particular environments without ultimately losing a sense of the overview.

The major works were sought out to provide a strong foundation, with some more transitional examples demonstrating significant moves in new directions. In other words while the exhibition was structured around the high points and obvious strengths, there was a deliberate attempt to allow these works to coexist with the more investigative works or phases of his development (albeit in a quite limited number of examples). In this way the aim was attain a valid sense of the overall development: from Olsen struggling to find a personal artistic vocabulary in the 1950s to the dramatic breakthrough of the early 1960s, to the quieter, more meditative works of the late 1960s, to the drawings of animals and large oils and watercolours of the 1970s, through to the landscapes, narrative-inspired works, portraits and gypsy caravans of the 1980s and 1990.

The timing of the retrospective (in 1991) was, in my view, very fortuitous. For the works of the 1980s to 1990 demonstrated an emphatic resurgence of strength in his paintings and drawings; confirming Betty Churcher's assessment of Olsen as 'a long distance runner'.[486] While there were obvious connections with works of the 1960s, there was also the sense of a progression in the later paintings and drawings revealing a greater depth of human experience, ironically at times driven by self-doubt and an increasing awareness of his own mortality - as in the portraits of older artists or *Donde Voy? Self-portraits in moments of Doubt,* 1989. While Olsen's reputation had been established in the 1960s, as I indicated in the Prologue of this

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[484] See photographic documentation in Attachment to the Epilogue.

[485] In relation to the broader questions of audience and who the exhibition is aimed at, the Olsen retrospective was clearly intended for a wide general audience as well as specialists in the field, with the hope that it would be rewarding in different ways for different people. As in the monograph, it was intended that while the exhibition would be essentially accessible to all interested people, it would also be scholastically relevant.

[486] Interview with Betty Churcher for the film directed by Don Bennets. Bennets also arranged for a television crew to interview me at my home office in Heathcote for this production which has subsequently been screened twice on ABC television.

thesis, I hoped that the revelation of the artist's *broader* development to the present, would reaffirm his standing as one of Australia's most significant artists.

Over several months I continued working through the selection process, striving for a balanced and lively exhibition. Then, in November 1990, James Mollison and I visited John Olsen at Chapel House Farm in Rydal to confirm the proposed final selection. Mollison wanted the letters from the gallery requesting loans to be sent out a year in advance of the retrospective and we were running over time. In the company of the artist, I was required to define the exhibition rationale, to go through the works (using the photographic archive) and to justify the choices that had been made. To facilitate this I worked with the National Gallery of Victoria floorplans to demonstrate the reasons for inclusions and exclusions (some of which had been mutually agreed along the way) in relation to the space and the balance of works across the time frame of 1955 - 1990. John Olsen agreed with the overall selection, making suggestions, for example, where two works were put forward that needed to be chosen from. It was a significant meeting in which the artist expressed his support and gratitude for being consulted in this way.

Once the final selection of some one hundred works had been made, a letter defining the aim of the exhibition as the 'first full-scale retrospective survey of John Olsen's work' was sent to the relevant public and private collections.[487] It was with some anxiety that I awaited the replies; naturally hoping that the important requests would be met. As it turned out the responses were overwhelmingly favourable, with most institutions and private collectors expressing their warm support for the project and agreeing to lend their works. Only two works could not be shown at the National Gallery of Victoria, one from a private collection and the other *The Bicycle Boys*, 1955, from the National Gallery of Australia (due to pending conservation). The latter was compensated for by the fact that the other significant work from the series *The Bicycle Boys Rejoice*, 1955 was available, as was the painting *The Rabbiters* which related closely to it. Another work from the National Gallery in Canberra, *Spring in the You Beaut Country*, 1961, was loaned to the first showing of the retrospective but could not travel on to the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney as it was already committed to an international exhibition.

During the course of 1991 I worked closely with the various departments of the National Gallery of Victoria. This included ongoing liaison with the registration staff

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[487] In relation to consultation with the staff of the National Gallery of Victoria, the curator of Special Exhibitions at the time, Jane Clarke, was very helpful in her advice and practical assistance, including preparing the loan request letters for the director's signature.

who very efficiently coordinated the crating and transportation of works from around Australia and from New Zealand in consultation with myself.[488] The exhibition staff had been very helpful in providing the floorplans for the spaces and together we also worked on documentation of the exhibition in terms of details such as exhibition labels, explanatory wall texts and signposts to guide viewers through the show, as well as the poster for the retrospective and design of a large banner to be installed outside the gallery. In relation to the wall panels within the exhibition, it was agreed that I would provide summary texts that would introduce the various groupings and signal transitions that were occurring in the development of the work. James Mollison felt quite strongly that these introductions needed to be brief so as to inform the visitor without providing lengthy interruptions to the experience of viewing the works.

As the time drew closer to the opening of the exhibition I also worked with the education section on the educational package for the exhibition[489] and with a film crew on a video to accompany the exhibition;[490] with media and publicity staff on the promotion of the exhibition (taking into account appropriate recognition of the sponsors);[491] and with the conservation section in terms of condition reports and any works that might need special attention.[492] The idea of having an integrated approach was facilitated by a number of meetings that were held at the gallery; in the course of which I was required to report on the progress that had been made, thus updating the various staff members on the overall project.

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[488] I assisted in providing a list of contact names, addresses and telephone numbers of all public and private lenders. During the various stages of the process I was requested to chase up responses to the formal loan agreements. The registrars and Jane Clarke played a role in ascertaining the overall valuation of the exhibition - with the works being formally valued by Anne Purves of Australian Galleries. Insurance cover and State Government indemnity were also looked after by the registration department with supplementary material on John Olsen's participation in the State of Victoria and the significance of the retrospective provided by myself.

[489] Colin Simpson worked on the preparations of the education package to accompany the exhibition and liaised closely with me throughout the process.

[490] This involved a visit to John Olsen's studio during which I conducted an interview with the artist. This was filmed by Arena productions, as was a segment with Olsen painting. I also provided the producers with relevant transparencies. The video was screened in conjunction with the exhibition in Sydney and Melbourne.

[491] This included preparing a media release for the exhibition, discussions about a sponsorship package and appropriate acknowledgment in all publicity of Carlton United Breweries in the use of their logo, as well as ongoing recognition in the second venue - the Art Gallery of New South Wales. We also discussed special events for the sponsors and the National Gallery of Victoria Business Council in relation to briefings and a special preview function around the time of the opening of the retrospective.

[492] Conservation staff played a valuable role and assisted in carefully cleaning and stabilising a work on loan from a private collection, *People who live in Victoria Street*, 1960.

Days of reckoning: final preparations and installation at the National Gallery of Victoria

Around the projected time of the installation, the staff at the National Gallery of Victoria were very busy with preparations for another large exhibition of the work of Toulouse Lautrec. This created problems with regard to the availability of a crew to work on the John Olsen Retrospective. While the opening date remained scheduled as it had always been, the time for unpacking the works, preparing the condition reports, placing the works in their locations and installing them (and labels and so on) kept being postponed. From the time when the crates had been delivered to the gallery through a period of several postponements of my travel from Sydney to Melbourne, I became progressively on tenterhooks. Each time I called in by phone, I would be told that it had been impossible to finish preparations for the space such as the painting and installation of screens due to the other pressures in the gallery. Finally, with scarcely eight days left to the opening, I could stand it no longer and put myself on a plane to Melbourne. When I arrived I went straight to the gallery and with considerable trepidation rang the director's office. 'I am sorry to be difficult but I am here in the building. Time is becoming of the essence. Is there any way I could have two staff members to at least assist me in unpacking the crates for the show?' Instead of the blast I had expected to receive on account of my temerity, the message was rapidly relayed, 'Of course; you can make a start this afternoon.'

As the crates began to be unpacked, I had to resist being overwhelmed by the experience. It had been quite some time since I had physically seen many of the works and it was the first time I was able to view them together. As they were unpacked in a random order in relation to the chronology, and as many of the works looked quite different in this context to the way they had looked in private homes, I found myself in a state of abject anxiety and self-doubt in relation to doing the artist's reputation justice. As we began to place the works around the walls I found that some areas worked really well while others were more of a struggle in terms of getting the balance right. When James Mollison appeared his reticence re-ignited my fears. Fortunately this sense of uncertainty began to dissipate as the traumas of the initial stages of the installation process were overcome.[493]

John Olsen's arrival at the National Gallery of Victoria just prior to the preview of the exhibition was an emotional time. Olsen's anxiety had been made manifest in an

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493 Around the time of the opening and beyond, James Mollison did express genuine support for the exhibition and appreciated the positive responses that came through from artists and others.

article by Keith Dunstan in the *Age* who interviewed him at Chapel House Farm, Rydal, before he travelled to Melbourne for the show. 'The ebullient John Olsen is slightly abashed at the thought of a retrospective. "You are really putting yourself on the line. It's like the 100-yard dash, but suppose if you come last."'[494] When Olsen first entered the exhibition space that included the works from *Head of a boy*, 1955, through to *Spanish Encounter*, 1960, he felt so overwhelmed at the experience of confronting such an array of works he had not seen for years that we had to leave. After meeting with James Mollison, followed by lunch and some alcoholic fortification the process of confronting the exhibition became a little easier. While Olsen was pleased with the way his work had come together, as I was only too well aware, it was impossible to overcome the feelings of nervousness before the exhibition had been launched and responded to by others.

From the outset I had been requested by the director to provide talks and lectures in the company of the artist who, in turn, agreed to answer questions. It was not a particularly easy task to talk about the work on behalf of the artist in his presence. In the early stages of presenting talks on the exhibition Olsen felt more comfortable with this approach. I recall one memorable lecture to which the audience responded enthusiastically (but which I found quite demanding) when we did a double act, taking turns in speaking about the art - on the one hand with me talking about the relevance of particular examples to the retrospective and the artist recounting his memories and experience of creating the work.

The exhibition was opened by The Lord McAlpine of West Green in the Great Hall on 31 October, 1991 and after the official speeches the large crowd was invited to view the exhibition in the gallery. By far the most rewarding experience for me, both on this occasion and later at the opening at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, was the feedback that I received from artists (including Jan Senbergs, Victor Majzner, Sidney Nolan, Colin Lanceley, Ann Thomson and others). There was a sense of genuine surprise, with many saying that they had no idea of the scope of the work, that they had previously been uncertain about how a retrospective could possibly come together and that they felt as though they were really seeing John Olsen properly for the first time.

The Olsen Retrospective was open for public attendance at the National Gallery of Victoria on 1 November 1991 and continued until 3 February 1992. It subsequently travelled to the Art Gallery of New South Wales where it was opened by the Hon.

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[494] Keith Dunstan, 'The long road to artists' heaven', *The Age*, 19 October, 1991.

Neville Wran (AC, QC) on 7 May 1992 and exhibited to the public from 8 May until 28 June. In relation to 'place' it was particularly inspiring for me, as the Guest Curator responsible for the installation at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, to be able to install the Sydney Harbour paintings in an exhibition area that looked out to the harbour itself and the boats in the Woolloomooloo docks that had so inspired John Olsen. As at the National Gallery of Victoria I was fortunate in Sydney to be able to install the exhibition in a series of consecutive spaces (that normally house the Australian Collection) - once again allowing breaks within the chronology and thematic groups.

In both venues I conducted training sessions for the gallery guides, special briefings to the sponsors and gallery societies, public lectures, floortalks, teachers' seminars and media interviews.[495] Before proceeding to the critical responses to the exhibition, it is necessary to conclude the discussion of the processes involved in bringing together the John Olsen Retrospective, with a summary of the major aims.

Summary of the aims of the Olsen Retrospective

In summary the aims were as follows:

. To establish Olsen's reputation as a major Australian artist whose contribution, while strong in the 1960s, is not isolated to one period but is reaffirmed in diverse ways through to 1990. In other words, for the first time to provide meaningful insights into the breadth of Olsen's artistic development between 1955 and 1990 through the selection of specific works and their installation in the exhibition.

. To emphasise the strengths without losing a sense of the true picture of the whole: taking care in the selection of the number of works from each period and the balance across the broad time-frame; also taking into account the experience of the viewer (providing substance without overload).

. To bring together works in a diversity of media including paintings, drawings, tapestries, ceramics and prints.

. To reflect the range of Olsen's concerns over the years: from works pertaining to the Australian landscape and his idiosyncratic grasp of the experience of place, to

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[495] In addition to an investigation of the media coverage below, an indication of the range of talks and events in the course of the retrospective at both State galleries is provided in the Attachment to the Epilogue.

still life and the domestic arena; from fauna and flora in the wild, to demotic imagery in the life of the street - be it Victoria Street, Kings Cross or the animated forms around Spanish doorways; from the delicacy and state of grace found in nature to psychological 'portrait-landscapes' and portraits of artists.

. To go beyond the one-dimensional view of Olsen as a bon-vivant; simultaneously revealing an artist capable of a great sense of *joie de vivre* and the 'life force' as part of a broader emotive range, with the later works conveying a more considered, internalised dimension, reflecting a breadth of human experience.

Media Coverage and critical responses to the exhibition

There was considerable media coverage of the John Olsen Retrospective, both in Melbourne and in Sydney. This was facilitated by the work undertaken by the staff in the media and publicity departments, both at the National Gallery of Victoria and the Art Gallery of New South Wales. This section includes a summary of the coverage followed by a more detailed analysis of the press reviews.

James Mollison and John Olsen were present at the Media Preview held on Thursday 31 October at the National Gallery of Victoria. As Guest Curator I was requested to provide a guided tour of the exhibition and answered questions from individual journalists. Following the tour, John Olsen also answered questions.

At the Art Gallery of New South Wales there was not a formal media launch and individual journalists reviewed the exhibition in their own time. I did, however have the opportunity to talk to a number of journalists, including the art critic, Elwyn Lynn, about rationale of the retrospective. One of the unexpected reviews came from the art writer and critic, Robert Berlind in a piece that he did for *Art in America*; providing international coverage for the exhibition.

In summary the major print media reviews included: Christopher Heathcote, 'Olsen's "You Beaut" years were a time of greatness', *Age*, Wednesday, 6 November, 1991; Sasha Grishin, 'Olsen defies categorisation', *Canberra Times*, Saturday, November 16, 1991; Robert Rooney, 'A happy ending to the Olsen story', *Australian*, Thursday, November 21, 1991; Paul McGillick, 'Olsen belies jester image', *Financial Review*, Friday November 22, 1991; Elwyn Lynn, 'Golden boy finds beauty in the gloom', *Weekend Australian Review*, May 16-17, 1992; John McDonald, 'Olsen's Osmosis', *Sydney Morning Herald*, Saturday, May 16,

1992 and Robert Berlind, 'John Olsen at the Art Gallery of New South Wales', *Art in America,* vol. 81, April 1993.

In my role as Guest Curator, I was also responsible for providing information and in some cases interviews on the retrospective and John Olsen's contribution to Australian art for the television coverage. This included The *Sunday Program*, Channel 9, reporter Catherine Hunter: background briefing and interview on camera in Sydney; the *7.30 Report,* ABC television, reporter - Sally Begby: background briefing and interview on camera in Melbourne on the day of the official opening of the retrospective; *Dateline*, SBS, reporter - Maeve O'Mara: background research briefing; *Sunday Afternoon* (Arts Program) ABC television: interview on camera with Peter Ross as guest on the 'Public Hangings' segment.

Critical responses to the John Olsen Retrospective

In order to make an assessment of the extent to which the principal aims of the John Olsen Retrospective were achieved, beyond the empirical positive responses that I received from artists and others, it is necessary to turn to the major reviews of the exhibition by art critics.[496]

Christopher Heathcote, in his review 'Olsen's "You Beaut" years were a time of greatness', made the extraordinary claim that 'in the past 50 years Australian art has produced only two great landscapists: Sidney Nolan and John Olsen'. He admitted that this might well be contested with others claiming the importance of Russell Drysdale and Fred Williams. 'Drysdale's and Williams's paintings were good, but they were not great: they did not confront and re-define our basic conception of the landscape.' By contrast he believed that Olsen's works of the early 1960s provided a fresh, exhilarating vision.

> Importantly, Olsen did not stay with suburbia. He turned his attention to the landscape, and for the first time an artist articulated the singular complexity of the Australian bush, this "beaut country" .../ Never again was the countryside to be a bleak wasteland, for Olsen discovered a ruddy beauty in the flickering emerald of flies swarming over wallaby droppings. Indeed, the painter revealed to his viewers the unaffected vitality of the landscape in 'Journey into the You Beaut Country' (1 & 2), 'Up and Down the Seaport', 'Spring in the You Beaut Country', 'Dappled Country' and 'Summer in the You Beaut Country'. In the process Olsen's paintings

496 Please note that the references for the reviews discussed here have been cited in the summary of media coverage above.

> transformed our very conception of landscape: Australia was now revealed as an environment, an integrated ecosystem.

However, Heathcote also claimed that by 1964 it was over. He acknowledged that there would be 'moving visions' but believed that 'the sheer inventive fervor, the crude beatnik excess had run itself out'.

> Over the following 30 years Olsen would refine and develop, arranging his visual alphabet of forms in differing combinations, and building up a recognisable artist's oeuvre. Make no mistake, when he was good it was nothing less than magic; but many of Olsen's paintings of the 1970s and 1980s lapsed in my opinion, into repetitive, self-indulgent havoc...[T]he moment of discovery comes only once, there is no return...But still I keep coming back to the early works. 'Half Past Six at the Fitzroy Pub', 'Up and Down the Seaport', 'Spring in the You Beaut Country' are not good paintings, they are great paintings. If you see just one exhibition this summer, it must be the John Olsen retrospective'.

One has to make the point that Heathcote's comments were not short on boldness. In plainly stating his preference for the works of the early 1960s, he also maintained the view of an apotheosis in Olsen's work of this period. For me personally it represented an underestimation of the artist's broader output and a contradiction of one of the central aims of the retrospective. For while I agree that 1960-1964 was a particularly important one in the artist's oeuvre and indeed a vital 'moment' of discovery, I also believed that Olsen's output deserved reappraisal beyond this point - not in terms of some ongoing 'beatnik excess' but in relation to the shifts and maturation of the artist over time, with the works of the 1980s revealing a very significant body of work.

Robert Rooney, writing in the *Australian* compared the John Olsen Retrospective with previous retrospectives, including those of Sidney Nolan, Albert Tucker, John Brack and Fred Williams. His central thesis, as the title of the review implies, 'Happy ending to the Olsen story', was that in the Olsen Retrospective the later stages of the development were of great importance to an appreciation of the artist's contribution.

> When taken as a whole the Nolan and Tucker surveys both proved to be visual chronicles of protracted declines (with occasional reversals) after strong beginnings. With Nolan having the edge on Tucker, Brack whose exhibition came between the two, showed a greater consistency over the decades, while Williams, who should have been

> his equal, suffered at the hands of an enthusiast seemingly reluctant to prune an over-inclusive display to manageable size.
>
> Although the Olsen retrospective does have its downward moments, especially during the period from 1974 to 1979, if judged in terms of a career spanning 40 or so years, unlike the Nolan or Tucker surveys it ends on a note of confidence with paintings rivalling those of the '60s.
>
> Already on the cards before James Mollison took over as director, the show's progress gained momentum when Deborah Hart, the author of a monograph on the artist, assumed the role of guest curator...
>
> The fact that three rooms of Australian painting have been emptied to display every aspect of Olsen's generous output gives some idea of the show's size.[497]

For Rooney, there were examples from the 1970s that in his words 'while popular are not to my taste', whereas the works that had the most enduring impact upon him were those relating to Spain: *Spanish Encounter*, 1960 (with its prelude in *Granada*, 1959) and *Calle Estrecha*, 1986, *Semana Santa*, 1987 and *Beckett Joins the Gypsy Caravan*, 1990.

While Robert Rooney made pertinent links between the works of the 1960s and 1980s, a more comprehensive overview of the retrospective came through in Sasha Grishin's review in the *Canberra Times*. In his review Grishin examined the transitions in Olsen's work over time, making the point that, in his view, despite the many places in which Olsen has lived, 'he has remained a Sydney-based painter', but one whose work 'does not find a convenient niche in the Sydney scene'. He commented on Olsen's philosophical approach and influences, making the interesting point that while in his earlier paintings there is 'an affirmation of faith in an occupied landscape', the later canvases 'such as *Channel country in flood* (1976-77) and *Nightfall, when wattle stains the doubting heart* (1980), explore the ancient and mysterious landscape, precious in its intricacy and majestic in its breadth'. Finally he takes issue with Christopher Heathcote's summation that the major breakthroughs having come to an end in by 1964.

> While there is a consistency and at times a repetitiveness in Olsen's oeuvre, every now and then he produces a work that makes you stop in amazement.

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[497] This point may seem contradictory in terms of Rooney's comments about the Fred Williams Retrospective. However, the latter included some four hundred works when shown at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, while the Olsen Retrospective comprised around one hundred works.

> The huge *Donde Voy? Self-portraits in moments of doubt* (1989) is such a painting. A dark haunting diptych which is the artist's most palpable expression of a struggle for integrity. It is a work of hypnotic intensity which speaks of a disturbing psychological state that has few parallels in contemporary Australian self-portraiture.
>
> It is precisely this sort of painting which saves Olsen from attempts at easy categorisation or a hasty dismissal as a painter who peaked early and is now reliving youthful fantasies.

It was heartening to read Sasha Grishin's comments with regard to his overall impression of the retrospective. 'Australian art desperately needs serious, well curated retrospective exhibitions of the work of its major contemporary artists. The Olsen show is such an exhibition - it is timely and of national significance.'

Paul McGillick, writing in the *Financial Review*, was also positive in his views about the curatorial input in terms of the selection of works and overall conception of the show. In his review, 'Olsen belies jester image', he commenced his appraisal by examining a public perception of the artist and what he considered to be the evidence of the retrospective.

> John Olsen is the affable bon vivant whose work can seem facile, whose very good humour and generosity has seemed ironically to overshadow the art. For some Olsen appeared a kind of court jester of the art world.
>
> Not that this would worry Olsen too much. The value of his work is amplified enormously by being brought together in this retrospective. It is an especially fine one too, because curator Deborah Hart has brought together the right work in just the right amount.

For McGillick the predominant tenet of the retrospective was the notion of 'the journey' in Olsen's output, 'a common enough theme but revealed even more than usual through the artist's own journeys in time and place, as well as through metaphorical journeys implicit in the art itself'. The review takes up the technical aspects with regard to the way that Olsen is generally considered as a graphic artist due to the characteristic 'wandering lines' but notes that 'what is also true is that Olsen is a painter', with the lines being painted and obeying the vision of the 'painter's eye'. The main sense of discovery that McGillick invites the audience to make in the process of visiting the exhibition, is to go beyond stereotypic notions of the artist, to discover the depth of meaning in the later works. '[He] is also an intellectual and spiritual seeker and two of the most arresting images in this show are the Beckett pictures, an oil on canvas and a watercolour, gouache and pastel on

paper, both with the title *Beckett joins the Gypsy Caravan* (1990). Beckett was probably the last great writer of our time, a lamp in our spiritual darkness.' It was rewarding to read McGillick's concluding comments:

> Here is an example of how a retrospective can amplify the work of an artist. Seeing Olsen's career laid out like this gives us the chance to see just what a good artist he is - by which I mean not only his craft, but also the quality of his artistic decisions which so often result in Olsen backgrounding that extraordinary craft in favour of the integrity of a picture.
>
> A moving, enormously enjoyable and scholastically valuable show and a credit to its curator, Deborah Hart, whose excellent book serves as a catalogue.[498]

In Sydney two substantial reviews appeared on Saturday 16 May: John McDonald writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, with a review entitled 'Olsen's Osmosis' and Elwyn Lynn in the *Australian*, 'Golden boy finds beauty in the gloom'. The sub-title to McDonald's review put the challenge of the retrospective on the line. 'The John Olsen retrospective will give the public a chance to judge whether charges of superficiality are justified.' He began the review of the exhibition by directly contesting Christopher Heathcote's comments of Olsen and Nolan being the only two great landscape painters in the last fifty years in Australia, noting that Fred Williams, Russell Drysdale and William Robinson could not be overlooked in this 'elite band'. McDonald then went on to analyse the various major components of the retrospective.

> The *You Beaut Country* series and related paintings of the early 1960s still look devastating today. Few Australian artists could rival Olsen for energetic brushwork and sheer Dionysian exuberance: few have such ability to lift the viewer up and carry him or her away. But perhaps the outstanding feature of these works is that they do not sacrifice complexity for spontaneity. In paintings like *Entrance to the Siren City of the Rat Race* and *McElhone Steps*, Olsen has crammed in enough incident to put even Breugel to shame.

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[498] In my experience it has been rare to receive such direct acknowledgement as the curator. While some of the reviews make mention of the curator's role others do not, focussing understandably on the show itself and John Olsen's artistic reputation. The latter is after all the most important factor. Nevertheless the care which McGillick took to include both was very much appreciated after the intensity of work that had gone into the publication and retrospective. I have never met the man but after he had finished reading the Olsen monograph he took the trouble to call me by phone and said, among other things, 'Keep writing'. In a world that often seems so full of negativity I won't forget this encouragement.

For McDonald the problematic area of Olsen's work emerged in the 1970s. While he felt that the works of the period did not denote complacency or lack of integrity, he believed that the artist's attempts to convey 'the void' in the 1970s was like 'trying to paint the unpaintable'. 'Influenced by oriental art and Buddhist philosophy, Olsen strove to capture that emptiness which is also fullness, but many of his attempts are inconclusive and hesitant.' He noted that the Zen concept of *wabi* - of profundity of expression, naturalness of form and economy of means - is as much about an attitude to life as well as art and as such is difficult for western artists to assimilate. 'Olsen's attempts are far better than Whiteley's wristy pastiches of oriental art, but they remain a pale, somewhat starved reflection of his energetic work of the 1960s.'

Nevertheless McDonald disagreed with Heathcote's assessment of the 'apotheosis' of the 1960s, pointing to the resurgence of strength in the works of the 1980s with *Golden Summer Clarendon*, 1983 - 'a vivid, all-encompassing landscape which sparkles with minute life forms, recalling the startling fusion of microcosmic and macrocosmic viewpoints in his earlier pictures'. Furthermore, whereas Christopher Heathcote saw *Where the bee sucks, there suck I*, 1984-6, as 'a syrupy image of Pickwick among the numbats', John McDonald wrote of it as 'one of the strangest and most striking paintings' in the retrospective. 'In this work, Olsen attempts a surreal fusion of human and landscape forms in which energy is not "sucked" from the environment, but showered over it from a kind of explosion in the centre of the panel. It is a joyous picture, marking an end to lingering hesitations, a reaffirmation of self and a hungry embrace of the world.' McDonald summed up his views on the strengths of the late works, tracing a path in the exhibition from the paintings related to Spain of 1985 through to the works relating to Goya, Beckett, Don Quixote, Jean de Florette and the dark self-portrait.

> If these works represented simply a return to form, it would be creditable enough, but Olsen's recent work has achieved a much greater distinction. It has found a kind of maturity that was never foreshadowed in his earlier work. From a series of drawings of artists in old age, in his paintings of 1989-90 Olsen moved into a "black period" resonant with intimations of mortality and the absurdity of life...
>
> Perhaps the most impressive picture is *Donde Voy? Self-Portraits in Moments of Doubt*, where Olsen portrays himself with an aging, raw-skinned face atop a body which is no more than a ghostly outline - carrion supported by a shadow...
>
> Perhaps the message is that all is not yet lost. Far from it! These recent pictures may not be the most attractive that Olsen has produced, but they are unique in Australian art. He has approached

> death and mortality with the same verve that he brought to bear on the urban landscape in the 1960s.

Finally McDonald noted that 'the message which emerges so strongly from this exhibition' is that of pulsating life, even in the midst of the 'bleakest meditations'. 'Olsen is not suited to painting emptiness - he is the most animated and vital of artists, whose greatest depths have found expression in works of flickering, restless movement. If that storehouse of energy has occasionally gone into hibernation, it has only required the right stimulus to find it springing back into action.'

Elwyn Lynn's review in the *Australian*, 'Golden boy finds beauty in the gloom' combines his personal recollections of the past with recent discoveries in the retrospective. He began by commenting on the overall impression of exuberance but balanced this with a sense of the oscillation of dark and light through the exhibition.

> John Olsen's mainly exuberant, optimistic and exciting retrospective, formerly at the National Gallery of Victoria, is on show until June 28 at the Art Gallery of NSW - the spacious, leisurely display there adding to the strength and sunny glory of the works.
>
> But it's not all exuberance and joyous buoyancy, for at the beginning there are the black, slack and tense whiplashes of *Spanish Encounter* (1960) - which became a celebrated painting from the first day it was shown - and from the year before, the thick impasto of *Granada*, painted in Spain...

Like Sasha Grishin, Lynn made special mention of some of the more mysterious landscapes such as *Nightfall, When Wattle Stains the Doubting Heart*, 1980, and *Night Train and Owls*, 1980. 'Such forlorn paintings and the stark, unusual *Still Life Influenced by the Desert* need emphasis lest his tenebrous successes be overlooked. The table becomes one of his expansive dried lakes in the void.' As with all the reviewers except Heathcote, Elwyn Lynn commented upon the 'masterly works' of the mid-1980s that came from a visit to Spain and, once again, upon *Donde Voy? Self-Portraits in Moments of Self-Doubt*, 1989, where 'like a character in Samuel Beckett, he emerges from the blackness of uncertainty'. 'Olsen entered the painting in the Archibald, which was won by Bryan Westwood, who had seen it some time before and told me that Olsen had painted the certain winner.' After summing up his impressions of the whole, 'wonderful cavorting of hills, creatures, rivers, lakes and roadways in Olsen's sun-drenched optimistic extravaganzas' Lynn concluded:

> The space that remains here, however, must be for his large, vertical watercolours, where lines sink into one another or fade into the paper in a wayward mesh not available in the oils. And there are beautifully magical, wandering tales - *The Rookery* (1978) is a masterpiece of the efflorescence of the intangible.
>
> That might sum up the whole rich, glowing and often stark show of sustained excellence. See it. It's full of further multifarious aspects that one cannot begin to list.

Elwyn Lynn's passionate response to some of the large watercolours of the 1970s contradicted previous viewpoints such as those held by Robert Rooney and others. Nevertheless he was joined in his enthusiasm by Robert Berlind who reviewed the John Olsen Retrospective for *Art in America.*

> Olsen is a master watercolourist - witness a series of large works (often around 8 feet high) on Japanese torinoko paper with titles such as *The Rookery, Dying Creek Bed* and *Owls at Cooper's Creek.* These exquisite and humorous paintings bear comparison with the best of the Zen sumi tradition without ever striking a false note.

Berlind also pointed out the strong *regional* aspect of John Olsen's art, finding that while the work shows affinities with Far Eastern art and demonstrates an interest in writers as Yeats, Thomas, Joyce and Beckett, 'this retrospective of his paintings revealed an oeuvre that could only have been produced in the Australian context'.

> He has taken as his chief subject the Australian landscape, and he has given expression to aspirations that permeate much of Australian culture. His acute evocations of local wildlife...and the immense, intractable landmass itself constitutes an art that is regional but in no sense provincial.

After discussing the works related to Spanish village life and the 'autobiographical probings in tragicomic mode', Robert Berlind closed his review with the following comment: 'Olsen's work has not yet been seen in the U.S., yet this retrospective would more than hold its own at any of our major venues.'

Conclusion to the John Olsen Retrospective and thesis

The purpose of this thesis, and by implication the monograph and the retrospective, has been to provide insights into the development of John Olsen's art over the years and his contribution to the cultural life of this country.

That contribution has been traced through a considerable body of research, outlined in the Prologue of this thesis, including gathering, assimilating and editing material from a wide range of sources, as well as independent study of the work itself and substantial original documentation. An awareness of the artist's oeuvre has been heightened through tracking down works that had not been reproduced or exhibited for many years (with quite a number appearing in reproduction in the monograph for the first time). The contribution has also been identified through the process of bringing together the retrospective exhibition, discussed in this section.

Tracing the gradual development of his work over the years reveals both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand the prolific nature of the overall output has resulted in a variable range of work. It is, however, difficult to categorically separate the positives and negatives, even though in particular stages of his development there are clearly more significant works than others. For part of the strengths, and the difficulties, reside in the artist's willingness to continually take risks within the realms of his idiosyncratic stylistic tendencies. In the course of risk-taking there have been both inevitable disasters as well as quite magical and at times profoundly illuminating moments of discovery.

In the final analysis John Olsen's contribution to date reveals an artist who does not, nor never has, fitted neatly into any school or category. His work has provided us with entirely new ways of considering the Australian environment - from such ebullient images as those of the 1960s evoking Sydney Harbour (so different from those who had come before such as Arthur Streeton or Lloyd Rees) through to more lyrical works such as *Golden Summer, Clarendon* , 1983. While on one hand Olsen is, in a sense, a regional artist, it is also true that whether in relation to Spain, Portugal or Australia, by entering with intensity into a geography of place and 'a geography of mind', the regional, local and internal simultaneously reveal understandings that are universal.

Much of John Olsen's oeuvre is infused with a feeling for poetry, an emotive sensibility and a striking imaginative and psychic drive. In the best of the work over the past four decades we find aspects of greatness in his capacity, like the alchemist,

to transform external and internal realities, through empathy, intuition, skill and ideas, into art that in turn has the capacity to transform the viewer and make him or her consider the world afresh. While some have described Olsen in terms of genius,[499] others had been more sceptical in the past, as Paul McGillick and John McDonald pointed out in their reviews of the retrospective.

John Olsen is undoubtedly a much more complex and interesting artist than many had given him credit for prior to the retrospective and it has been widely recognised that he has produced a body of work (from the 1950s to 1990) that has assured his place in the history of Australian art in the present and the future.

In conclusion, while it is not possible to be definitive in relation to the output of a living artist, it is my sincere hope that, through the work I have undertaken in this written documentation and in my capacity as Guest Curator of the retrospective, a more comprehensive picture and deeper understanding of the scope of John Olsen's artistic development and contribution to Australian art has emerged.

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[499] See Lou Klepac, catalogue essay, *John Olsen: recent works*, Sherman Galleries, 28 October - 20 November 1993.

The author with the banner for the John Olsen Retrospective
installed outside the National Gallery of Victoria, 1991

ADDENDUM TO THE EPILOGUE

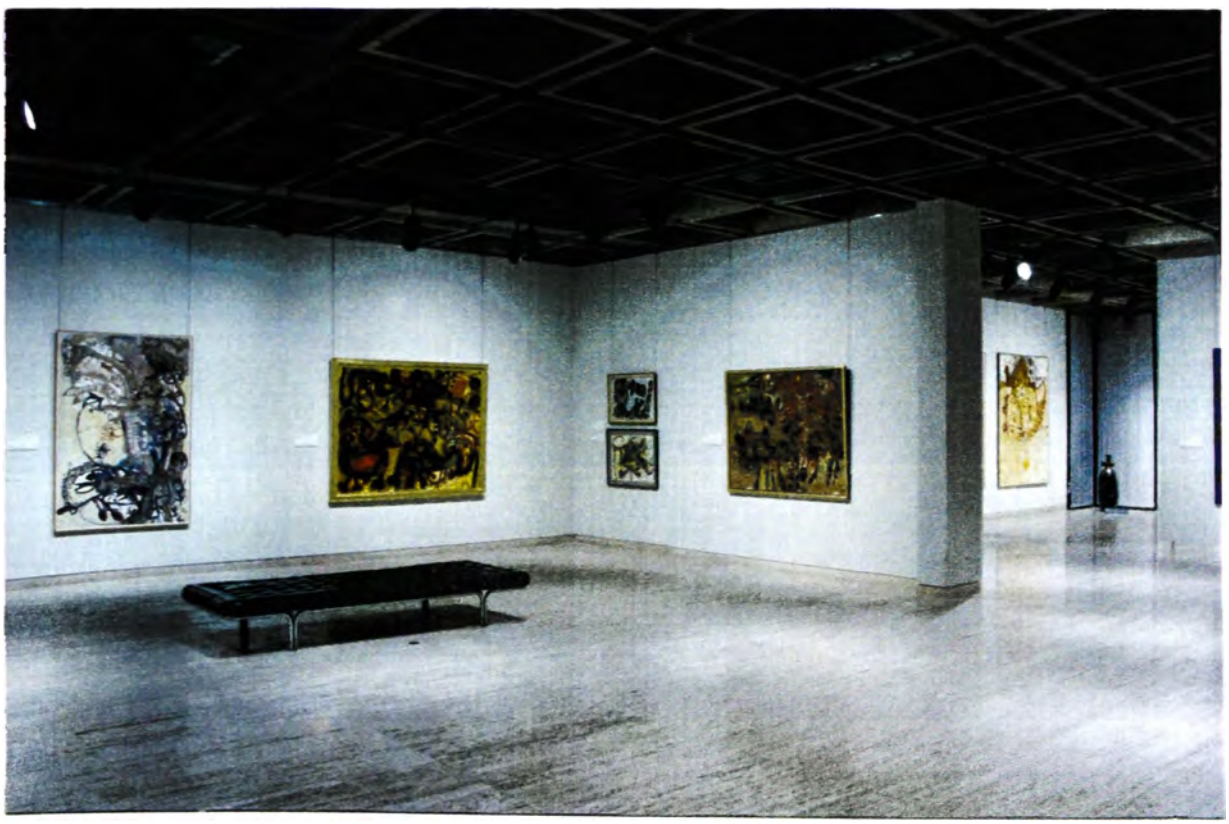
THE JOHN OLSEN RETROSPECTIVE:
Photographic documentation of the installation at the Art Gallery of New South Wales

Entrance to the John Olsen Retrospective exhibition.
Introducing the exhibition are examples of early and late works, while through the entrance panels in the first room are small paintings pertaining to Olsen's formative years as an artist in the 1950s.

Selected photographic documentation of the installation
of the John Olsen Retrospective at the Art Gallery of New South Wales

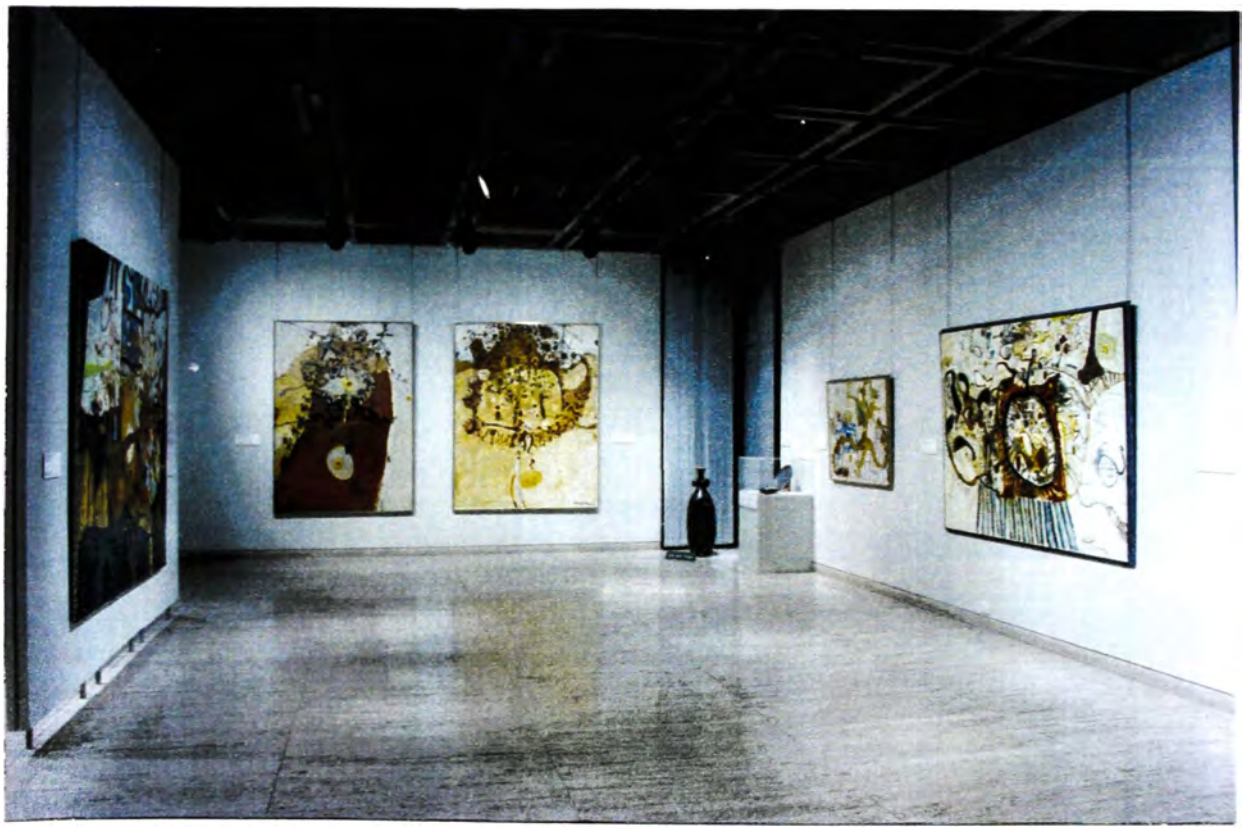
ABOVE: Works of the 1950s leading up to the breakthrough that occured at the end of Olsen's formative period with paintings such as *Granada* 1959 and *The Procession* 1960. *Spanish Encounter* 1960, was located opposite. Through to the next room we are able to see works relating to Sydney Harbour including *Entrance to the Siren City of the Rat Race* 1963 and *The Ship passes by* 1973, indicating the thematic groupings within the broadly chronological framework.

BELOW: Facing a grouping of paintings relating to the city such as *Half Past Six at the Fitzroy* 1963 and *McElhone Steps* 1963, were works from the 1960s pertaining to a reinvented, vital Australian ethos and animistic connection with the land, including *Journey into the You Beaut Country No.2* 1961 (left) and *Summer in the You Beaut Country* 1963 (right) adjacent to two double-hung works on paper which encompass metamorphic imagery, as does the painting next to them *My Cat's Life* 1963.



Selected photographic documentation of the installation
of the John Olsen Retrospective at the Art Gallery of New South Wales

In this room works of the late 1960s and early 1970s were shown. On the one hand they reveal transitions in relation to Olsen's approach to landscape in *Pied Beauty* 1969 (above right) painted at Dunmoochin, Victoria. This was hung adjacent to the serene *The Chasing Bird Landscape* 1969, which in turn was placed alongside *Two Eyes of the Landscape* 1970 and *You Beaut Country, Hawkesbury Dapple* 1970 (far wall below). Overlapping thematic concerns are indicated in *Love in the Kitchen* 1969 (on the screen above) opposite works pertaining to food, cooking and kitchens such as ceramics produced with Robert Mair and Tom Sanders, and *Portuguese Kitchen No.1* 1966 and *The picinic* 1965 (below right).

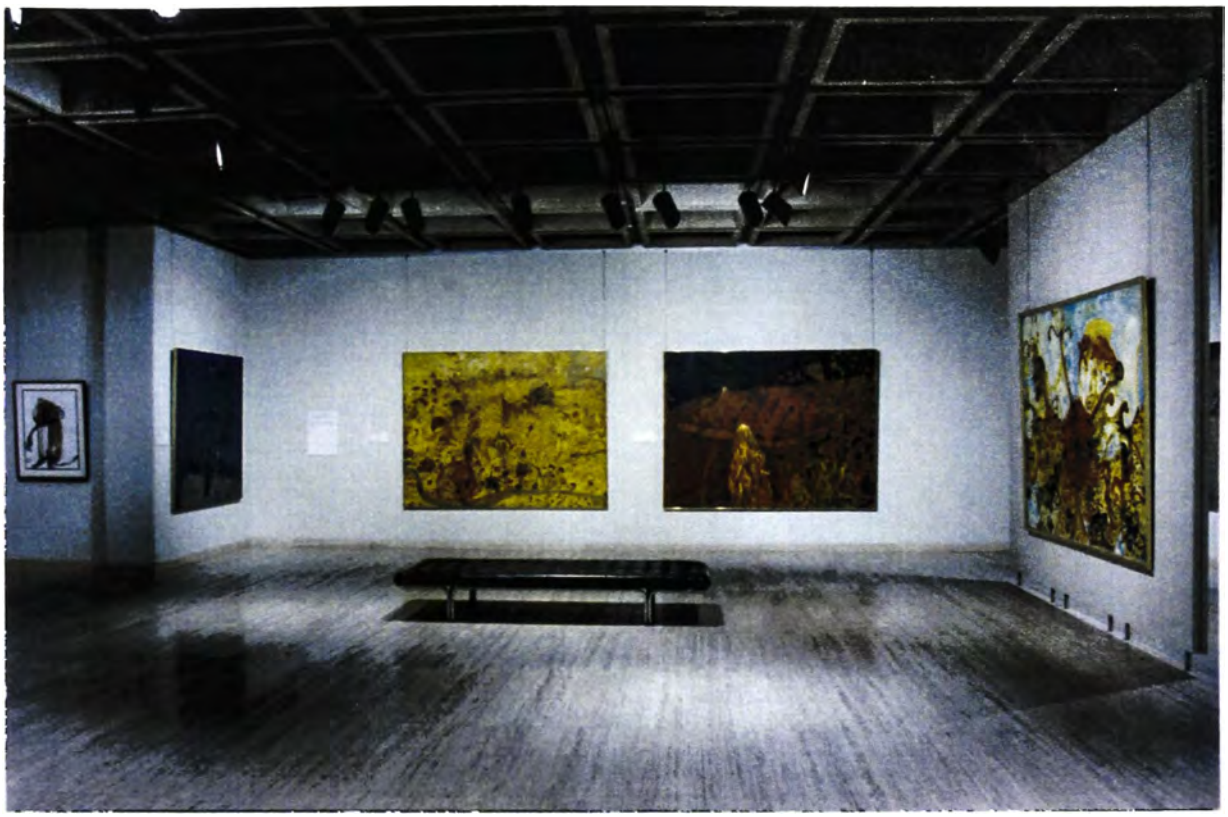


Selected photographic documentation of the installation
of the John Olsen Retrospective at the Art Gallery of New South Wales

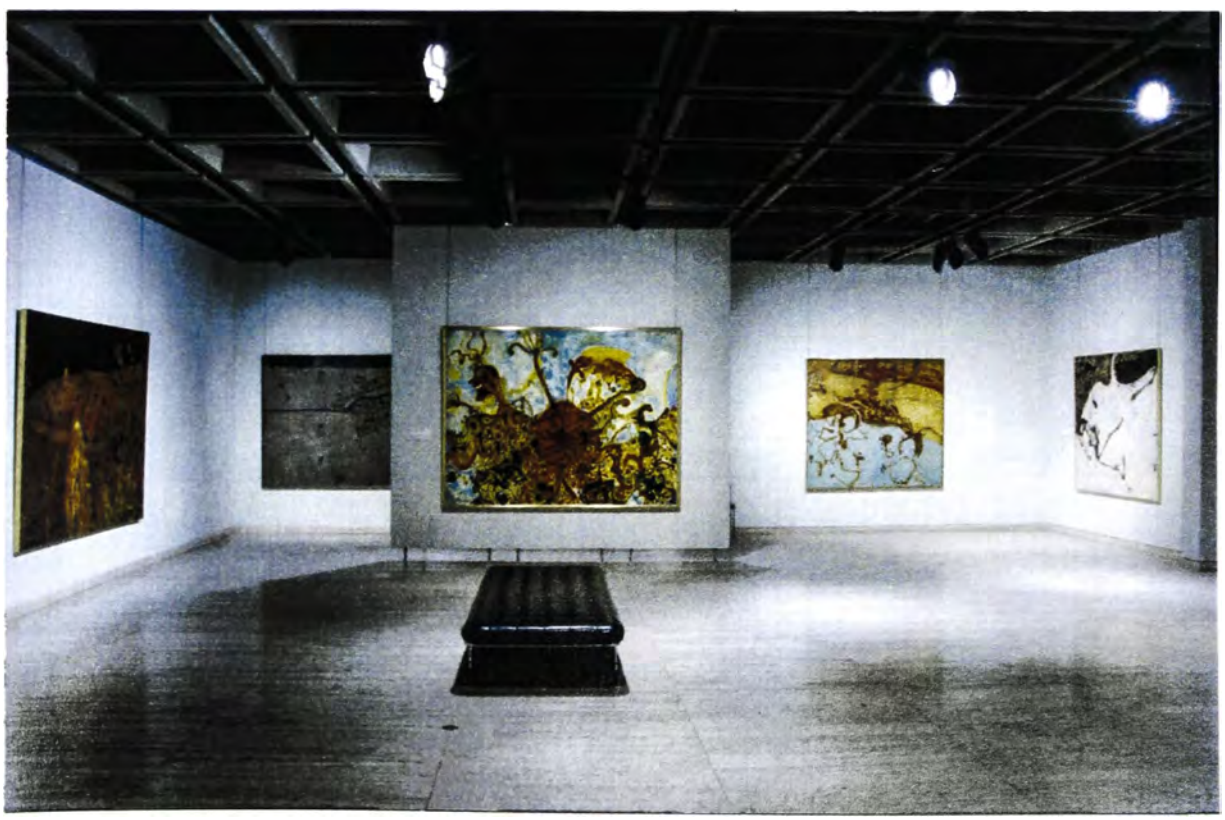
ABOVE: Watercolour works on paper, relating to John Olsen's experiences at Lake Eyre as well as to a distillation, fluency and spaciousness that in part came from his interest in Oriental art, were shown as a grouping and placed opposite the painting *Lake Eyre* 1975 and other works of the 1970s.

BELOW: Moving from the watercolours of the 1970s into the next room the viewer was able to absorb the artist's experience of the North-West of Western Australia in works on paper such as *Camel and Bungle Bungles* 1983 and *Jacanas and Ord in the Wet Season* 1983 (below right), adjacent to *Dry Creek Bed* 1982. They were also introduced to other places that inspired his work in the 1980s such as the South Australian coast in *Tidal Estuary* 1982 and *River in Flood and Blind Bird* 1982 (below left in the same room - see also over the page).

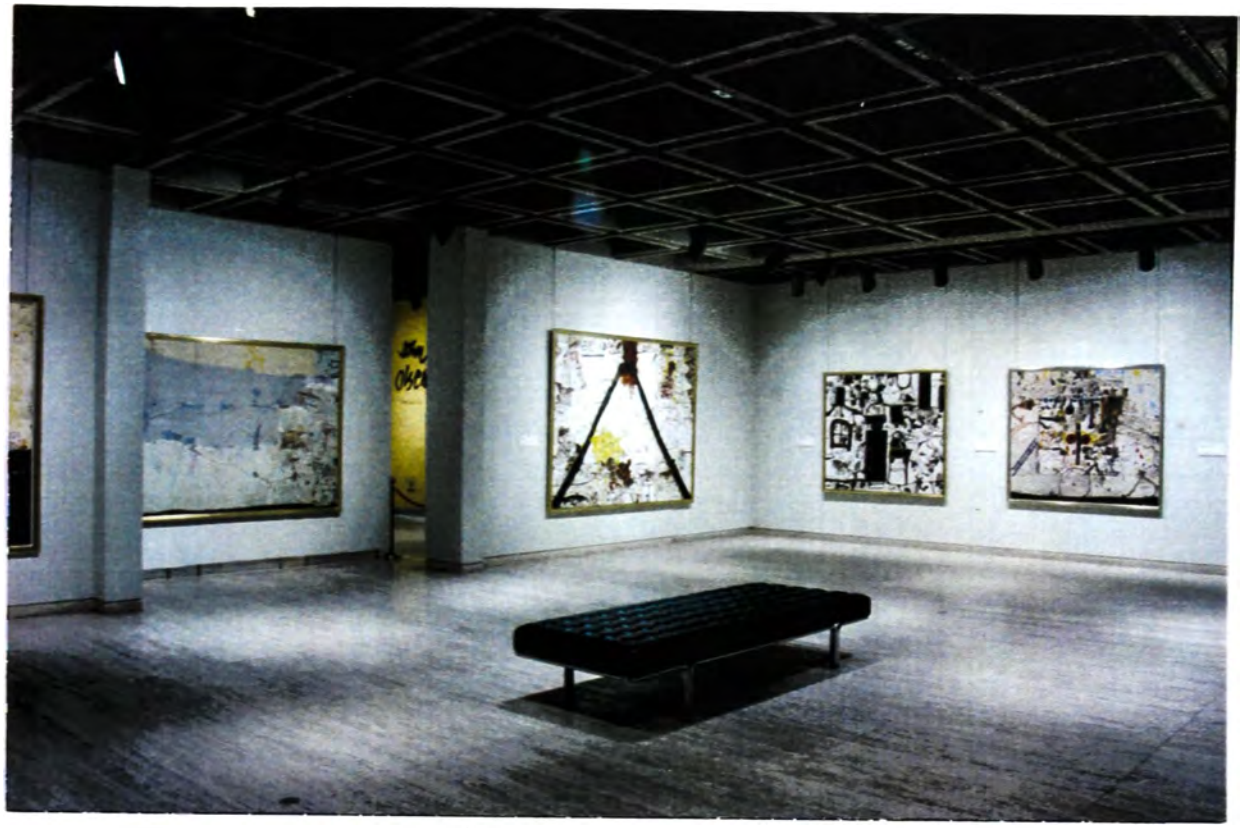
Selected photographic documentation of the installation
of the John Olsen Retrospective at the Art Gallery of New South Wales



In the early 1980s John Olsen went to live in Wagga Wagga and then moved to Clarendon in South Australia. This period marks a resurgence of strength in his oil paintings which reflected his passionate interest in the landscape and also in poetry. This is evident in the evocative *Nightfall, When Wattle Stains the Doubting Heart* 1980 (shown at an angle on the left above, introducing this space in the exhibition) followed by paintings from the 'Clarendon Season' series relating to summer and autumn - the first painted in 1983 and the second in 1985. In the centre of the room (below on the screen) is the idiosyncratic *Where the bee sucks, there suck I* 1984-86, recalling Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and expressing Olsen's longheld belief in the connectedness of all living beings with the natural environment.



Selected photographic documentation of the installation
of the John Olsen Retrospective at the Art Gallery of New South Wales



This exhibition space took the viewer into the last phase of the exhibition. The section included works related to John Olsen's visit to Spain in 1985 and subsequent paintings such as *El Amoladar (The Tinker)* 1986 and *Semana Santa (Holy Week)*, 1987 (see the pair of works - above right). This period was also marked by difficulty in his personal relationship revealed in the adjacent painting, *El Delor No.2* 1987, situated in turn alongside the quieter, introspective *Donde Vas? Where are you going?* 1989 (on the screen). The narrative-inspired work *Don Quixote Enters the Inn* 1989 (below) was hung next to the large, dark self-portrait, *Donde Voy?: Self-Portraits in Moments of Doubt*, 1989 and in both cases it was possible to detect a small egg, a recurring symbol of hope, shining out from the darkness.

Selected photographic documentation of the installation
of the John Olsen Retrospective at the Art Gallery of New South Wales

In the final sections of the exhibition light and dark were clearly intertwined. While on the one hand works such as *Clarendon Spring, Make Sure the Sun Wipes its Feet* 1984 (on the screen above) revealed the sunnier side of John Olsen's work, the intimate drawings on paper collectively entitled 'Letters to a Young Artist' 1986-87 (in the small adjacent room - above) conveyed a thoughtful artist, paying homage to others and also reflecting on old age. The darker side of reflections on self and ageing came through in *Self-Portrait with Egg* 1990 (below left), while the 'Gypsy Caravan' series 1989-90 (below), were shown to encapsulate both light and dark, stillness and untrammelled energy; with these works also signalling the continuation of the journey.

CATALOGUE OF WORKS: PLATES AND FIGURES

NOTE *Exhibitions:* Terry Clune Gallery was the name of the gallery until 1963, from which date it became Clune Galleries.
. All works included in the *John Olsen Retrospective* at the National Gallery of Victoria 1 November 1991–February 1992 are noted in the exhibitions listings as *Retrospective* 1991–92.

PLATES

1 ***Lane Cove*** c. 1943,
oil on board, 24 x 17.2 cm.
Signed l.r.: John Olsen.
Collection of the artist.
Provenance: Painted when the artist was about 15 years of age; for many years this work remained in the possession the artist's mother, Esma Olsen.

2 ***Head of an old man*** 1950,
oil on board, 42 x 37 cm.
Signed and dated 1.1: John Olsen 1950.
Collection of the artist.

3 ***Still Life*** c.1951,
oil on board, 40 x 51 cm.
Unsigned, undated.
Collection of the artist.
Exhibited: Society of Artists, Education Department Gallery, Sydney, August 1952.

4 ***Still Life with boy*** 1954,
oil on canvas, 60.5 x 75.2 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen, Nov. 1954.
Collection: Newcastle Region Art Gallery. Gift of Miss Lucy Swanton 1974.
Exhibited: Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, February 1955, cat. 10; *An exhibition of paintings and drawings from the collection of Lucy Swanton,* The University of Sydney War Memorial Gallery of Fine Arts, 2 May–13 May 1960. Cat. 7.

5 ***Memory of the Wild Colonial Boy*** 1954,
oil on canvas, 62 x 51.5 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '54.
Private Collection.
Exhibited: Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, February 1955, cat. 3.

6 ***Bird on Window Sill*** 1955,
oil on board, 23 x 29cm.
Signed and dated u.r.: JO '55.
Collection: City of Horsham Regional Art Gallery, Purchased by Van Guard Insurance Co. Ltd. to honour Sir Percy Spender (Mack Jost Collection)
Exhibited: John Olsen and Eugen Baragny, February 1955, Macquarie Galleries, cat.5 (initially titled, *Bird on a Window*).

7 ***The Bicycle Boys Rejoice*** 1955,
oil on canvas, 59.7 x 79.4 cm.
Signed and dated u.r.: John Olsen 55.
Collection: James Fairfax.
Exhibited: Sydney Painting 1955, interstate exhibition organised by Macquarie Galleries for the Victorian Artist Society, Melbourne, May–June 1955 and Royal Society of Artists, Adelaide, August 1955, cat. 39; *Christmas Selection 2,* Macquarie Galleries, December 1955, cat. 15. Olsen also recalls that this work, together with *The Bicycle Boys,* was exhibited in Mervyn Horton's Galleria Expresso, Rowe Street, Sydney, 1956; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

8 ***Head of a boy*** 1955 (also known as *Portrait of a boy),*
oil on board, 55.6 x 42.4 cm.
Signed and dated u.r.: John Olsen '55.
Collection of the artist.
Exhibited: Christmas Selection I, Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, December 1955 (as *Portrait of a boy),* cat. 19; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

9 ***The Bicycle Boys*** 1955
(previously titled *The Bicycle Boys Arrive* and *Signor Coppi, Winner*),
oil on canvas, 92.5 x 77.2 cm.
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 1969.
Provenance: Wallace Thornton; purchased by the NGA from Rudy Komon Gallery, 1969.
Exhibited: Dante Alighieri Italian Subject Art Competition, November 1955; Galleria Expresso, Sydney, 1956 (see cat. 7 above).

10 ***The Rabbiters*** 1955,
oil on board, 76.5 x 57 cm.
Signed and dated u.r.: J.O. 55.
Collection of the artist.
Exhibited: Easter 1956, Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, March–April 1956, cat. 16; *Focus 79,* RMIT Gallery, Melbourne, 1979, cat. 9; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

11 ***View of the Western World No.1*** 1956,
oil on board, 116.8 x 91.4 cm.
Signed and dated l.c.: John Olsen 56.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Pacific Loan Exhibition: Contemporary Australian Painting on board Orient Line *S.S. Orcades.* Shown in Sydney, Auckland, Honolulu, Vancouver, San Francisco, October–November 1956, cat 68; *Australian Contemporary Paintings* (an exhibition shown in all State Galleries), cat. 1; *Australian Painting: colonial, impressionist, contemporary,* Tate Gallery, London, January–March 1963 (as *Western World No. 1*), cat. 160; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

12 ***View of the Western World No.3*** 1956,
oil on board 91.5 x 122 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: J. Olsen '56.
Collection: Art Gallery of Western Australia.
Provenance: Selected from the artist's studio in Victoria Street, Potts Point, by the director of the Art Gallery of Western Australia at the time, Laurie Thomas. Approved by the trustees 12 October 1956 (letter to the artist 16 October 1956 from Laurie Thomas).
Exhibited: Pacific Loan Exhibition: Contemporary Australian Painting, on board Orient Line *S.S. Orcades.* Shown in Sydney, Auckland, Honolulu, Vancouver, San Francisco, October–November 1956, cat. 70. (Some previous documentation refers to this work as *View of the Western World No. 2.* However the latter is cat. 69, reproduced in the *Pacific Loan Exhibition* catalogue b&w.)

13 ***Dry Salvages*** 1956,
oil on hardboard, 119 x 90.9 cm.
Signed and dated u.r.: John Olsen 55.
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales.
Gift of E.M. Gardiner in memory of her daughter Marie Gardiner, 1972.
Exhibited: Direction I, Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, December 1956, cat. 3;
Retrospective 1991–92.

14 ***Landscape Mediterranean*** 1957,
oil on canvas on board, 54.5 x 65.5 cm.
Inscribed l.r.: JO (indistinct).
Collection: La Trobe University, Melbourne.
Provenance: Mervyn Horton
Exhibited: Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, August 1958, cat. 14.

15 ***Bush Walk*** 1957,
oil on canvas, 92.2 x 73 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: JO '57.
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
Provenance: Macquarie Galleries: purchased by the NGA from Kym Bonython Gallery, Paddington, 1974.
Exhibited: Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, August 1958, cat. 6; *Recent Australian Painting*, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, June–July 1961, cat. 75; *Paintings from the Kym Bonython Collection of Modern Australian Art,* Museum of Modern Art & Design of Australia, Melbourne, October 1963, cat. 39: *Retrospective* 1991–92.

16 ***Dylan's Country*** 1957,
oil on canvas, 92 x 72.5 cm.
Not inscribed.
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales.
Provenance: Completed October 1957 and selected by the director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Hal Missingham, from Olsen's exhibition sent back from Spain, Macquarie Galleries, August 1958.
Exhibited: Macquarie Gallery, August 1958, cat. 10; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

17 ***Initiation No.2*** 1957,
oil on canvas, 93 x 73.2 cm.
Signed and dated u.l.: John Olsen '57,
verso: Estate of the late M.E.R. Horton.
Collection: Sussan Corporation, Melbourne.
Provenance: Mervyn Horton.
Exhibited: Macquarie Galleries, August 1958, cat. 16.

18 ***Boys and Bicycle*** 1958,
oil on canvas on board, 88.9 x 69.8 cm.
Signed l.r.: John Olsen.
Collection: James Fairfax.
Provenance: Painted during Olsen's sojourn in Europe.
Exhibited: Ronald Millen, John Olsen, Museum of Modern Art and Design of Australia, Melbourne, October, 1958, cat. 12; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

19 ***Majorca*** 1958,
pastel and watercolour on paper on board, 48 x 52 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 1958, inscribed l.r.: MAJORCA.
Collection: Dr. Jolly Koh.

20 ***Terassé*** 1959,
oil and gesso on hessian on board, 119.3 x 99.5 cm.
Signed l.l.: J.O.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Olsen, Galerie Lambert, Paris, May 1960, cat. 3.

21 ***Granada*** 1959 (also known as *Lorca's Country*),
oil on canvas, 99 x 119 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '59, inscribed l.r.: Granada.
Collection: Dr. Joseph Brown.
Provenance: Robert Shaw; Paul Haefliger.
Exhibited: Terry Clune Gallery, Sydney, October, 1960, cat. 1; *Recent Australian Painting,* Whitechapel Art Gallery, London June–July 1961, cat. 74; *Peter Upward*, Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne, December 1984;
Retrospective 1991–92.

22 ***Entrance to the Siren City of the Rat Race*** 1963,
oil on canvas, 120 x 182.5 cm.
Unsigned, undated.
Private collection on loan to Macquarie University, Sydney.
Exhibited: Aspects of Australian Figurative Painting 1942–1962; Dreams, Fears and Designs, The Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney, 1984, cat. 51; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

23 ***Spanish Encounter*** 1960,
oil on three hardboard panels, 183 x 366 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: J.O. 60.
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales.
Provenance: Completed 1 October 1960 in the artist's studio, 109 Victoria Street, Potts Point, Sydney; purchased from Terry Clune Gallery, 1960.
Exhibited: Terry Clune Gallery, Sydney, October 1960, cat. 2;
The Child in us All, St. John's Cathedral, Brisbane, April–May 1976, cat. 2;
Retrospective 1991–92.

24 ***The Procession*** 1960 (two panels),
acrylic, ink and wash and gesso on board, 91.5 x 244 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 60.
Collection: Mr and Mrs Charles Nodrum, on loan to La Trobe University.
Provenance: Peter Upward, Rudy Komon.
Exhibited: Abstract Art in Australia, RMIT, Melbourne, August 1983; *John Olsen, Peter Upward,* Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne, December 1984; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

25 ***People who live in Victoria Street*** 1960,
oil on board, 117.8 x 182 cm. Signed and dated u.r.: John Olsen '60.
Private collection, currently on loan to the University of Wollongong.
Provenance: A gift from the artist to the current owner after it was first exhibited at Terry Clune Gallery.
Exhibited: Terry Clune Gallery, October 1960, cat. 3; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

26 ***Journey into the You Beaut Country No.1*** 1961,
oil on composition board, 152.7 x 101.9 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: John Olsen '61.
Collection: National Gallery of Victoria.
Provenance: Painted in the artist's studio, Paddington, Sydney; purchased from Gallery A, Melbourne 1961.
Exhibited: 9 Sydney, David Jones Art Gallery, Sydney, July 1961, cat 12. and Gallery A, Melbourne, 1961, cat. 1; *You–Beaut Country: Australian Landscape Painting 1837–1964,* National Gallery of Victoria, October 1964;
Retrospective 1991–92.

27 ***Journey into the You Beaut Country No.2*** 1961,
oil on composition board, 185.8 x 124.2 cm.
Signed and dated l.c.: John Olsen 61.
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery.
Provenance: Purchased from *H.C. Richards Memorial Prize* exhibition 1961. Awarded the prize by the judge of the competition, Russell Drysdale.
Exhibited: H.C. Richards Memorial Prize, Queensland Art Gallery, November 1961, cat. 59; *Australian Painting Today,* toured State Galleries, March 1963–December 1964; *Australian Paintings and Tapestries of the past 20 years* (an exhibition to commemorate the opening of New South Wales House by Her Majesty the Queen) London, May 1972; *The Child in us All,* St. John's Cathedral, Brisbane, April–May 1976, cat. 7 (incorrectly dated 1966); *John Olsen—In Search of the You Beaut Country 1961–1986,* Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, cat. 1; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

28 ***Spring in the You Beaut Country*** 1961,
oil on composition board, 183 x 122 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: John Olsen '61.
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
Gift of Rudy and Ruth Komon, 1984.
Exhibited: Rudy Komon Collection, Gallery A, Melbourne, November 1964, cat. 34; *The Private Collection of Mr & Mrs Rudy Komon,* Georges Gallery, Melbourne, August 1971 (as *You Beaut Spring*) cat. 19; *The Child in us All*, St. John's Cathedral, Brisbane, April–May 1976, cat. 3; *Retrospective* 1991–92, National Gallery of Victoria only.

29 ***Summer in the You Beaut Country*** 1963,
oil on hardboard, 137 x 180 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '63, inscribed l.r.: title.
Collection: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Hobart.
Presented by Godfrey Phillips International 1968.
Exhibited: Viscount Collection, Australian Galleries, Melbourne 1963 and subsequently on Australian tour of State Galleries; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

30 ***Blue Orpheus*** 1961,
oil on composition board, 92 x 220 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: John Olsen '61.
Private collection.
Provenance: Exchange of paintings between Olsen and the late husband of the current owner.
Exhibited: Clune Galleries, March 1963, cat. 10; *9 Sydney,* Gallery A, Melbourne, August–September 1961, cat. 4 (not included in Sydney component of this show).

31 ***Up and Down the Seaport*** 1961,
oil on hardboard, 182.8 x 121.8 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: John Olsen '61.
Collection: Art Gallery of Western Australia.
Provenance: Awarded the *Perth Prize for Contemporary Art;* purchased from the exhibition 1961.
Exhibited: Perth Prize for Contemporary Art, Art Gallery of Western Australia, October–November 1961, cat. 24; *Sydney Harbour 1794–1979*, S.H. Ervin Museum and Art Gallery, Sydney, August 1979, cat. 76; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

32 ***Portrait Landscape No.2*** 1961–62,
oil on board, 152.4 x 122 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '61–62.
Private collection.
Provenance: Robert Hughes.
Exhibited: Retrospective 1991–92.

33 ***People who live in the You Beaut Country*** 1962,
oil on board, 152.4 x 121.9 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: John Olsen 62.
Private collection.
Provenance: Purchased from Clune Galleries 1963.

34 ***Creek Bed, Hill End*** 1961,
oil on board, 91.5 x 122 cm.
Signed and dated l.r. (in 1988).
Collection: Mr and Mrs Charles Nodrum.

35 ***Dappled Country*** 1963,
oil on canvas, 122.5 x 153.5 cm.
Signed l.l.: John Olsen.
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
Provenance: Clune Galleries; purchased Gallery A, Sydney, 1971.
Exhibited: Clune Galleries, March 1963, cat. 4; *The Australian Landscape Travelling Exhibition*, toured to all State Galleries, March–December 1972, cat. 48; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

36 ***Tree of life*** 1963,
oil on canvas, 182.8 x 122 cm.
Signed l.r.: John Olsen.
Private collection.
Provenance: Awarded *Georges Invitation Art Prize*, 1963.
Painted in Yarramalong, New South Wales during January–February 1963; acquired by a private collector from Clune Galleries 1963; re-sold through Christie's, October 1973.
Exhibited: Clune Galleries, March 1963 cat. 2; *Georges Invitation Art Prize*, Georges Gallery, Melbourne, May 1963.

37 ***Half Past Six at the Fitzroy*** 1963,
oil on canvas, 137.5 x 182 cm.
Signed l.r.: John Olsen.
Lengthy inscription verso: 'Painted Jan.–Feb. 1963 at Yarramalong near Wyong, NSW. Exhibited: Olsen one–man show Clune Gallery, Sydney, 6 March, 1963 (cat. 1). Title: The Fitzroy is a pub at Cathedral and Dowling Street, Woolloomooloo, Sydney. 6.30 was closing time at NSW bars until April 1963. Owner: Daniel R. Thomas 15/26 Darlinghurst Road, Kings Cross. Bought from Clune Gallery, March 1963 ...'.
Collection: Art Gallery of South Australia. Gift of Daniel Thomas, 1979;
Retrospective 1991–92.

38 ***McElhone Steps*** 1963,
oil on board, 121.3 x 182.5 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '63, inscribed l.r.: McELHONE STEPS. Collection: Alan Boxer, Canberra.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, October–November 1963, cat. 1;
The Boxer Collection, Nolan Gallery, Lanyon, 1982, cat. 9, reproduced back cover of catalogue;
Retrospective 1991–92.

39 ***Humphrey*** 1963,
oil on board, 88 x 92 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: John Olsen 63, inscribed l.l.: Humphrey.
Private collection.
Provenance: Gift of John Olsen to a private collector;
later sold through Australian Galleries.

40 ***Entrance to the Seaport of Desire*** 1964,
synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 167.6 x 213.4 cm.
Inscribed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 64.
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. Gift of Sandra McGrath 1968.
Provenance: Completed in Olsen's studio at Watsons Bay.
Exhibited: Gallery A, Sydney, 1964, cat. 7; *Sydney Harbour 1974–1979,* S.H. Ervin Museum and Art Gallery, Sydney, cat. 75; *The Artist & The City*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, travelling art exhibition, 1963, cat. 28; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

41 ***Me the gardener*** 1964,
oil on canvas 121.7 x 183.2 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '64.
Collection: Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, Launceston.
Purchased 1964 (Launceston Art Purchase Fund).
Exhibited: Launceston Art Purchase Prize (prize winner), 1964.

42 ***My Cat's Life*** 1963 (also known as *My Cat's Garden*),
oil on canvas, 120.5 x 151.5 cm.
Private collection.
Provenance: Clune Galleries, May 1965.
Exhibited: Retrospective 1991–92.

43 ***Childhood by the Seaport*** 1965,
oil on board, 213.5 x 150.6 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '65, inscribed l.r.: Childhood by the Seaport.
Collection: Alan Boxer. *Provenance:* Purchased from South Yarra Gallery, 1965.
Exhibited: South Yarra Gallery, June 1965, cat. 6; *The Boxer Collection*, Nolan Gallery, Lanyon, 1982, cat. 12; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

44 ***The Picnic*** 1965,
oil on board, 121 x 182.5 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '65.
Private collection.
Provenance: Painted at Watson's Bay prior to Olsen's departure for Portugal.
Purchased initially from Clune Galleries, 1965.
Exhibited: Retrospective 1991–92.

45 ***Summer in the You Beaut Country*** 1962,
oil on composition board, 396.4 x 366 cm (six panels).
Collection: National Gallery of Victoria.
Presented through the Art Foundation of Victoria in 1978 by Mr Frank McDonald.
Provenance: Painted as a ceiling for Frank McDonald's flat in Sydney, 1962.

46 ***Joie de Vivre*** 1964.
Woollen tapestry, 180 x 299 cm. Designed by John Olsen in Australia, woven at the Portalegre Tapestry Workshop, Portugal. Woven inscriptions l.l.: MTP (monogram)/John Olsen/ Australia; l.r.: Joie de Vivre.
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales.
Provenance: Purchased by the Trustees (Florence Turner Blake Bequest Fund) from the John Olsen exhibition at Clune Galleries, April 1965. Edition of 6: 1/6. The other tapestries from the edition went to the National Gallery Victoria, Melbourne; The Mertz Collection, Port Washington, New York and private collections.
Exhibited: John Olsen, Clune Galleries, April 1965, cat. 1; *The Child in us All*, St. John's Cathedral, Brisbane, April–May 1976, cat. 4.

47 ***Life Burst*** 1964,
oil and synthetic polymer on three hardboard panels, 146.4 x 639.2 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen, inscribed l.r.: Life Burst.
Collection: Newcastle Region Art Gallery.
Gift of the Sir William Dobell Art Foundation, 1976.
Provenance: Initially commissioned as a ceiling painting for the entrance corridor of Thelma Clune's apartment, Sydney. It was transferred to a private house in Avalon and subsequently hung in the foyer of Transfield House, Sydney.
Presented to the Newcastle Region Art Gallery in February 1976.

48 ***Five Bells*** 1963,
oil on hardboard, 264.5 x 274 cm.
Collection: George and Eva Clarke.
Commissioned by the current owners in 1963.
Exhibited: Sydney Harbour 1794–1799, S.H. Ervin Museum and Art Gallery, August 1979, cat. 77.

49 ***Sea Sun and Five Bells*** 1964,
oil on three hardboard panels.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '64, inscribed l.r.: Sea Sun and Five Bells.
Private Collection.
Commissioned by the current owner in 1964 as a result of having seen George and Eva Clarke's ceiling (cat. 48).

50 ***King Sun*** 1965 (also know as *Sydney Sun*),
oil on three hardboard panels, 164 x 360 cm. Collection: Rupert Murdoch.
Provenance: Sold to a private collector, South Yarra Gallery; purchased from Rudy Komon Gallery, 1972. *Exhibited:* South Yarra Gallery, June 1965, cat. 2; verso also indicates that this work was sent to Skinner Galleries, Perth.

51 ***We are all but Toys of the Mind*** 1965,
oil on canvas, 183 x 244 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '65.
Collection: James Fairfax.
Exhibited: Clune Galleries, April 1965, cat. 6; South Yarra Gallery, June 1965, cat. 4.

52 ***Altar*** 1966,
oil on canvas, 99.4 x 79.8 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: John Olsen 66.
Collection: Newcastle Region Art Gallery.
Exhibited: Clune Galleries, May 1967, cat. 8.

53 ***Portuguese Kitchen No.1*** 1966,
oil on board, 94.5 x 125 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '66.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Clune Galleries, May 1967, cat. 1; *John Olsen – In Search of the Open Country 1961–1986*, Heide Park and Art Gallery, 1986, cat. 3.

54 ***Portuguese Kitchen No.2*** 1966,
oil on canvas, 122 x 182.8 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '66.
Private collection.

55 ***Nude with Clock*** 1966,
woollen tapestry, 153 x 203 cm.
Designed by John Olsen, woven at the Portalegre Tapestry Workshop, Portugal.
Woven inscription l.l.: MTP (monogram)/fino/John Olsen.
Collection: Art Gallery of Western Australia.
Exhibited: Clune Galleries, May 1967; South Yarra Gallery, Melbourne, July–August 1967; *The Child in us All*, St John's Cathedral, Brisbane, April–May 1976, cat. 9.

56 ***Verdure*** 1966,
woollen tapestry, 153 x 207 cm.
Designed by John Olsen, woven at the Portalegre Tapestry Workshop, Portugal.
Woven inscription l.l: MTP (in monogram) /Fino/John Olsen, edition 6: 2/6. Collection: Westpac Banking Corporation.
Exhibited: Clune Galleries, 9 May 1967; South Yarra Gallery, July–August 1967; *The Child in us All*, St. John's Cathedral, Brisbane, April–May 1976, cat. 5.

57 ***Round and about the Harbour*** 1967,
pastel, gouache and watercolour on paper, 79 x 77 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: John Olsen, '67.
Private collection.
Exhibited: John Olsen–Encounters with Drawing, Wollongong City Gallery, December 1987–January 1988 and Australian Galleries, Melbourne, May 1988, catalogue cover and pl. 22.

58 ***Love in the Kitchen*** 1969 (also know as *Love and the Kitchen*),
oil on canvas, 199 x 213.4 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: JO '69.
Collection of the artist.
Exhibited: Donemoochin [sic] *Summer: John Olsen* '69, Rudy Komon Gallery, 1969, cat. 7; *The Child in us All*, St. John's Cathedral, Brisbane, April–Mary 1976, cat. 9; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

59 ***Pied Beauty*** 1969,
oil on composition board, 121.8 x 134 cm. Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '69.
Collection: Art Gallery of South Australia, South Australian Government Grant 1969.
Provenance: Purchased from White Studio gallery, 1969.
Exhibited: Rudy Komon Gallery, Sydney 1969, cat. 11; *John Olsen '69*, White Studio Gallery, Adelaide, November 1969, cat. 24; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

60 ***Wattle and moon*** 1969,
oil on canvas, 122 x 151.5 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: John Olsen '69.
Private collection.
Exhibited: John Olsen '69, White Studio gallery, Adelaide, November 1969, cat. 27.

61 ***Clouds and the Earth*** 1969,
gouache on paper, 48.5 x 68 cm.
Signed and dated l.l: John Olsen '69.
Private collection, UK.
Provenance: Rudy Komon Gallery, 1969; Leonard Joel, November 1985.

62 ***Jeparit*** 1969,
oil on board, 119 x 139.2 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 69.
Private collection.
Exhibited: John Olsen '69, White Studio gallery, Adelaide, November 1969, cat 18; Reid Gallery, Brisbane 1970, uncatalogued.

63 ***Mallee Country*** 1969,
oil on canvas, 156 x 140.5 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: John Olsen '69.
Private collection.
Exhibited: John Olsen '69, White Studio gallery, Adelaide, November 1969, cat. 7; Australian Galleries, October 1972, cat. 6.

64 ***[The] Chasing Bird Landscape*** 1969,
oil on canvas, 166 x 209 cm.
Signed and date l.r.: John Olsen '69.
Collection: Westpac Banking Corporation. Awarded the Wynne Prize, 1969.
Provenance: Purchased by the Commercial Bank of Australia (now Westpac) from Rudy Komon Gallery.
Exhibited: Wynne Prize, Art Gallery of NSW, 1969, cat. 156; Reid Gallery, Brisbane, November–December 1970, cat. 2; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

65 ***Two Eyes of the Landscape*** 1970
(also known as *The Eyes of the Landscape* and *Two Eyes of the Dam*),
oil on canvas, 215 x 153 cm. Signed and dated l.l.: JO 70.
Private collection, USA.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, October 1972, cat. 2; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

66 ***Lake Hindmarsh, the Wimmera*** 1970
(also known as *The Wimmera – Lake Hindmarsh*),
oil on canvas, 171 x 186 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 70.
Private collection. Awarded the T.A.A. and Australian National Art Prize (Trans-Australian Airlines and the *Australian* newspaper, June 1970).
Provenance: The artist.
Exhibited: T.A.A. Art Prize, Melbourne; Australian Galleries, October 1972, cat. 3; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

67 ***Dinner Service*** 1969–70.
John Olsen and Robert Mair.
Ceramic dinner service, variable dimensions.
Collection: Terry Whelan.
Provenance: Commissioned by Terry Whelan while Olsen and Mair were living in Dunmoochin, Victoria.
Exhibited: Retrospective 1991–92.

68 ***Selected Ceramics*** 1982.
John Olsen and Robert Mair.
(Back cover of catalogue for *John Olsen* exhibition,
Australian Galleries, July 1982.)

69 ***Eastern World*** 1969–71,
John Olsen and Tom Sanders,
ceramic mural, 5.95 x 14.75 metres.
signed extreme l.c.: Tom Sanders & l.c.: John Olsen.
Collection: The University of Melbourne Art Gallery.
Purchased with special funds with assistance from the
Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council. Location: Deakin Court, Melbourne University.

70 ***Western World*** c.1969-1971,
designed by John Olsen,
woven by Bruce Arthur and Deanna Conti,
Brudea Studio, Timana Island.
Woollen tapestry, 150 x 204 cm,
BHP Art Collection.
Provenance: Purchased from Rudy Komon Gallery 1971.

71 ***You Beaut Country, Hawkesbury Dapple*** 1971–72,
oil on canvas, 214 x 167 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 71–72.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Rudy Komon Gallery, November–December 1971, cat. 6; Australian Galleries, Melbourne, October 1972, cat. 1; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

72 ***Salute to Five Bells*** 1972–73 (details and panoramic view of mural),
synthetic polymer on 8 hardwood panels, 2.90 x 21.53 metres.
Collection: The Sydney Opera House Trust.
Located: North Foyer of Main Concert Hall, Sydney Opera House.
Provenance: Commissioned by the Sir William Dobell Foundation 1972.
Painted in a warehouse in The Rocks and subsequently completed in the Opera House.

73 ***The ship passes by*** 1973 (also known as *Sinking*),
oil on acrylic on hardboard, 183 x 244 cm.
Unsigned and undated.
Collection: Australian Galleries.
Exhibited: Rudy Komon Gallery, October–November 1973 (as *Sinking*), cat. 3; Australian Galleries, August–September 1975 (as *Sinking*), cat. 14;
Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, August–September 1986, cat. 9;
Retrospective 1991–92.

74 ***Captain Dobbin*** 1973,
oil and acrylic on marine ply, 183 x 229 cm.
Signed and dated l.l: John Olsen 73.
Collection: Norman Glen, Gosford.
Provenance: Rudy Komon Gallery; Australian Galleries.
Exhibited: Sydney Opera House Biennale, November, 1973;
Atelier 72, Adelaide Festival, March 1974.

75 ***Newcastle Coalboat*** 1973,
oil on hardboard, 137.5 x 151 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '73.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Rudy Komon Gallery, Sydney, October–November 1973, cat. 4; Australian Galleries, Melbourne, 1986; Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, August–September 1986, cat. 6;
Retrospective 1991–92.

76 ***Fogg Dam*** 1974,
oil on board, 92 x 128.8 cm.
Signed and dated.
Collection: Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin.
Exhibited: Rudy Komon Gallery, December 1974; Australian Galleries, August, 1977, cat. 7; *Paintings and Drawings by John Olsen from the Permanent Collection*, Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory (name of venue has changed), May–June, 1986.

77 ***Brolgas dancing*** ('Wild Australia' series),
gouache on paper, 34.5 x 39.2 cm.
Signed l.r.: John Olsen.
Private collection. *Provenance:* The artist.

78 ***Brolgas: Townsville Common*** ('Wild Australia' series),
gouache on paper, 43 x 52 cm.
Unsigned, undated.
Private collection. *Provenance:* The artist.

79 ***Heron and Eel, Fogg Dam***, undated
gouache and watercolour on paper, dimensions unknown,
see publication *Wild Australia*, written by Douglas Dorward, illustrated by John Olsen, published by William Collins Publishers Pty Ltd, 1977, p.92.

80 ***Lily pond*** 1987,
watercolour and pastel on paper, 189 x 99 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '87.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, May 1988.

81 ***North Queensland Lily Pond*** 1978,
gouache, watercolour and pastel on paper on board, 115 x 123.5 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 1978, inscribed: N.Q. Lily Pond.
Private collection.
Provenance: Barry Stern Gallery, 1978.

82 ***Lake Eyre*** 1975,
oil on canvas, 214 x 200 cm.
Signed and dated l.r. John Olsen '75.
Collection: Australian Galleries.
Exhibited: Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane, May 1976, cat. 1; Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, 1986, cat. 8; Retrospective 1991–92.

83 ***Owls over a Drying River*** 1980 (also known as *Five Owls over a Drying River* and *Five Owls over the River*),
watercolour on torinoko paper, 192 x 100 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '80.
Collection: Australian Galleries.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, October 1980, cat. 11; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

84 ***Avocet Pond*** 1976,
watercolour on Arches paper, 80 x 84 cm.
Signed and dated l.l: John Olsen '76. Private collection.
Exhibited: Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, 1986, cat.10.

85 ***Coopers Creek in Flood*** 1975
oil on canvas, 135 x 150 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '81*.
Collection: The Christensen Fund, on loan to the Art Gallery of Western Australia.
Exhibited: Bortignon's Kalamunda Gallery of Man, Festival of Perth, 1982, cat. 27; *Retrospective* 1991–92. *Olsen sometimes dated paintings a number of years after they were created. This work was discussed by the artist in a lecture given at the Art Gallery of Western Australia in 1978. It is dated as 1975 in the catalogue for the Festival of Perth exhibition.

86 ***Dark Void*** 1976,
oil on canvas, 138 x 152 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 76.
Collection: National Bank of Australia.
Provenance: Purchased from Australian Galleries, 1977, currently in Los Angeles office.
Exhibited: Ray Hughes Gallery, May 1976; Australian Galleries, August, 1977, cat. 3.

87 ***Goyder Channel*** 1975,
watercolour and gouache on torinoko paper, 190 x 100 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 75.
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. Purchased 1980.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, August 1977, cat. 9; Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, cat. 7; *Twentieth Century Australian Watercolours from the Collection*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, April–June 1989, cat. 61; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

88 ***Arrival at the Void*** 1975,
watercolour on paper, 192 x 100 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 75.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, August–September 1975, cat. 12; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

89 ***The Simpson Desert approaching the Void*** 1976,
oil on canvas, 151.5 x 136.4 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 76.
Collection: Queensland University of Technology. Purchased 1976.
Exhibited: Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane, May 1976; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

90 ***Channel Country in flood*** 1976–77,
oil on canvas, 168.2 x 215 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 76–77.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, August 1977, cat. 1; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

91 ***The Rookery*** 1978,
watercolour on torinoko paper, 192 x 100 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '78, inscribed l.r.: Rookery.
Collection: Australian Galleries.
Exhibited: Retrospective 1991–92.

92 ***Dying Creek Bed*** 1979,
watercolour and gouache on torinoko paper. 192 x 100 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '79.
Collection: Edith Cowan University, Western Australia. Purchased 1980.
Exhibited: Lister Gallery, Festival of Perth 1980, cat.6; *Retrospective* 1991-92.

93 ***Owls at Cooper's Creek*** 1980,
gouache on torinoko paper, 192 x 100 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '80.
Collection: T.A. & J. Hibberd.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, October 1980, cat. 14; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

94 ***Rabbit and Kangaroo Paws*** 1979,
gouache on torinoko paper, 192 x 100 cm.
Collection: Amcor Ltd., Melbourne.
Exhibited: Lister Gallery, Festival of Perth, 1980, cat. 11; Australian Galleries, Melbourne, October 1980, cat. 13; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

95 ***Black Faced Monkeys, Mt. Kenya*** 1989,
gouache and pastel on paper, 155 x 100 cm.
Signed l.r.: John Olsen, inscribed l.l.: title.
Collection: Nancy Kasprzycki, Adelaide.

96 ***Giraffes Mount Kenya*** 1989 (also known as *Giraffes & Balloon*),
gouache and pastel on torinoko paper, 192 x 100 cm.
Signed l.r.: John Olsen, inscribed l.c.: Giraffes & Balloon.
Collection Dr. Jolly Koh, Adelaide.
Exhibited: Aptos Cruz Gallery, Adelaide, October 1989; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

97 ***Elephants*** 1989,
watercolour, gouache and pastel, 155 x 100 cm.
Signed l.r.: John Olsen.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Aptos Cruz Gallery, Adelaide, October 1989; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

98 ***Nightfall, When Wattle Stains the Doubting Heart*** 1980,
oil on canvas, 167 x 159 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '80.
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales.
Purchased 1981.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, Melbourne, October–November 1980, cat. 3; *3 Years On: A Selection of Acquisitions 1978–1981*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1981, cat. 30 (incorrectly dated 1979); Heide Park and Art Gallery, 1986, cat 13; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

99 ***Night Train and Owls*** 1980
oil on canvas. 167 x 159 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '80.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, October, 1980, cat.2; *Retrospective* 1991-92.

100 ***River in Flood and Blind Bird*** 1982,
oil on canvas, 165 x 180 cm. Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 82.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, July 1982, cat. 2; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

101 ***Tidal Estuary*** 1982,
oil on canvas, 162 x 180 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 82.
Collection: State Bank of Victoria.
Exhibited: Australian Gallery, July 1982, cat. 1; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

102 ***Pilbara Train*** 1982 (diptych) (also known as *Hammersley Ore Train*),
oil on hardboard, 183 x 244 cm.
Signed l.l.: John Olsen.
Collection: The Christensen Fund.
Exhibited: The Land Beyond Time (extensive tour, see exhibitions listing, also for *The Land Beyond Time* entries below).

103 ***Dry creek bed*** 1982 (also known as *Dry creek bed, Drysdale National Park*), oil on canvas, 121.8 x 182.5 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: John Olsen '82.
Collection: The Christensen Fund.
Exhibited: The Australian Galleries, July 1982, cat. 7; *The Land Beyond Time* (extensive tour); *Retrospective* 1991–92.

104 ***Still life influenced by the Desert*** 1982,
oil on canvas, 134 x 149.5 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 82.
Collection: The Christensen Fund.
Exhibited: Tynte Gallery, Adelaide Festival, 1984, cat. 4; *The Land Beyond Time* (extensive tour: not included in the Art Gallery of Western Australia part of the tour; travelled subsequently to other venues); *Retrospective* 1991–92.

105 ***Camel and Bungle Bungle Ranges*** 1983 (also known as *Camel in Bungle Bungle*), watercolour and pastel on paper, 80 x 79.2 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: John Olsen 83.
Collection: The Christensen Fund.
Exhibited: The Land Beyond Time (extensive tour); *Retrospective* 1991–92.

106 ****Jacanas and the Ord in the Wet Season*** 1983 (also known as *Ord River in the Wet*), watercolour and pastel on paper, 81.2 x 80.5 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 83.
Collection: The Christensen Fund.
Exhibited: The Land Beyond Time (extensive tour); *Retrospective* 1991–92.
*Incorrect spelling of title in previous documentation as 'Tacanas'.

107 ***Duck à l'Orange*** 1981,
oil on canvas, 167 x 182 cm. Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '81.
Collection: The Christensen Fund on loan to the Art Gallery of Western Australia.
Exhibited: Bortignon's Kalamunda Gallery of Man, Festival of Perth, 1982, cat. 32; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

108 ***Golden Summer, Clarendon*** 1983,
oil on hardboard, 183 x 244 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '83.
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales.
Purchased with assistance from the Salomon Brothers, 1985.
Exhibited: Tynte Gallery, Adelaide Festival, March–April, 1984, cat 1; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

109 ***Where the bee sucks, there suck I*** 1984–86
oil on composition board, 182 x 244 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: John Olsen 84–86.
Collection: National Gallery of Victoria.
Presented through the Art Foundation of Victoria by John Olsen, Governor, 1986.
Exhibited: Tynte Gallery, Adelaide, April 1984 as a ceiling painting titled *The Force that through the Green fuse drives the Flower Drives my Green Age ...*, cat. 15; Australian Galleries, Melbourne, September– October, 1986, cat. 3; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

110 ***Clarendon Spring, Make Sure the Sun Wipes its Feet*** 1984,
oil on hardboard, 184 x 245 cm.
Collection: Broken Hill City Art Gallery. Purchased by the Broken Hill City Council with the assistance of the artist and the office of the Minister for the Arts, New South Wales.
Exhibited: Tynte Gallery (group exhibition), December 1984; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

111 ***A Road to Clarendon: Autumn*** 1985,
oil on canvas, 184 x 245.5 cm.
Signed and dated l.l: John Olsen '85.
Collection of the artist.
Awarded the Wynne Prize, 1985.
Exhibited: Tynte Gallery, Adelaide, October–November 1985, cat. 1; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

112 ***Broken Egg and Summer Landscape*** 1986–87,
oil on canvas, 197 x 228.5 cm.
Signed and dated l.l: John Olsen '86.
Collection: Wynne Schubert, Brisbane.
Exhibited: The Jack Manton Prize 1987, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1987.

113 ***Britten's Peter Grimes*** 1984,
oil on canvas, 120 x 180 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: JO 84, inscribed l.r.: title.
Victorian Art Centre Public Art Collection. Location: Stalls Foyer of the State Theatre.
Gift of Loti Smorgon 1984.

114 ***Mozart's Papageno the bird catcher in the Magic Flute*** 1984,
oil and mixed media on canvas, 120 x 180 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: JO 84, inscribed l.r.: title.
Victorian Art Centre Public Art Collection. Location: Stalls Foyer of the State Theatre.
Gift of Loti Smorgon 1984.

115 ***Aida*** 1985,
oil on hardboard, 188 x 358 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: John Olsen 85, inscribed l.l.: Aida.
Victorian Art Centre Public Art Collection. Location: Stalls Foyer of the State Theatre.
Gift of Loti Smorgon 1984.

116 ***Paella*** 1981,
woollen tapestry, 152.4 x 365.7 cm.
Designed by John Olsen, woven at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop.
Interpretation: Alan Holland. Weavers: Illona Fornalski, Alan Holland, Pam Joyce.
Woven inscriptions l.l: VTW (monogram); l.r.: John Olsen '81.
Collection: Smorgon Consolidated Industries, Victoria.

117 ***Rising sun*** 1987,
woollen tapestry, 182 x 306 cm.
Designed by John Olsen, woven at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop.
Weavers: Cresside Collette, Jennifer Sharpe, Tass Mavrogordato. Woven inscription: VTW (monogram); l.r.: John Olsen '87.
Private collection.

118 ***Light playing with evolution*** 1989,
woollen tapestry, 200 x 250 cm.
Designed by John Olsen, woven at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop. Weaver: Andrea May. Trainee: Peter Churcher. University of Melbourne Art Collection. Commissioned through Australian Galleries for display in the Zoology building of the University of Melbourne.
Exhibited: Retrospective 1991–92.

119 ***Semana Santa*** (*Holy Week*) 1987,
oil on canvas, 151 x 166 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: John Olsen 87.
Private collection.
Provenance: Purchased from Australian Galleries, 1987.
Exhibited: Retrospective 1991–92.

120 ***Calle Estrecha*** (*The Narrow Street*) 1986,
oil on canvas, 170 x 216 cm. Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 86.
Collection: National Gallery of Victoria. Purchased through the Art Foundation of Victoria with the generous assistance of Eva and Marc Besen, Governor, 1986.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, September–October 1956, cat. 4; Heide Park and Art Gallery, August–September 1986, cat. 24; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

121 ***Spanish black door*** 1986,
oil on canvas, 152 x 213 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '86.
Private collection, Singapore.
Exhibited: Painters and Sculptors: Diversity in Contemporary Australian Art, Queensland Art Gallery, 1987, which travelled to the Museum of Modern Art, Saitama, Japan, December 1987.

122 ***El Amoladar*** (*The Tinker*) 1986,
oil on canvas. 153 x 166 cm.
Signed and dated l.l: John Olsen '86.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, September–October 1986, cat. 2; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

123 ***Goya's Dog, Life escaping a Void*** 1985,
oil on canvas, 140 x 156 cm.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, August–September 1986, cat. 22, *The Jack Manton Prize 1987*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 1987.

124 ***Goya's Dog and Paella*** 1986,
oil on canvas, 167 x 213 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '86.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, September–October, 1986, cat. 5.

125 ***El Delor, No. 2*** 1987,
oil on canvas, 197 x 257 cm.
Signed l.r.: John Olsen.
Chartwell Collection, Centre for Contemporary Art, Hamilton, New Zealand.
Exhibited: Retrospective 1991–92.

126 ***Donde Vas?*** (*Where are you going?*) 1989,
oil on canvas, 167 x 213 cm.
Private collection.
Provenance: Purchased from Australian Galleries.
Exhibited: Wynne Prize 1989, cat. 69; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

127 ***Donde Voy? Self-Portraits in Moments of Doubt*** 1989,
oil on canvas (two sections), 183 x 366 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '89, inscribed l.l.: Donde Voy.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Archibald Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1989; Australian Galleries, 1991, cat. 1; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

128 ***Self-Portrait with Egg*** 1990,
watercolour and gouache, 186 x 100 cm.
Signed l.r.: John Olsen.
Collection: Australian Galleries.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, April 1990, cat. 33; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

129 ***Jean de Florette*** 1989,
oil on canvas, 183 x 244 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 89.
Collection: Australian Galleries.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, April 1990, cat. 1.

130 ***Don Quixote Enters the Inn*** 1989,
oil on canvas, 183 x 244 cm.
Collection: Mr and Mrs Saxon. Awarded The Sulman Prize, 1989.
Exhibited: The Sulman Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, cat. 99; Aptos Cruz Gallery, Adelaide, 1990, cat. 3; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

131 ***Beckett Joins the Gypsy Caravan*** 1990,
oil on canvas, 183 x 244 cm.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, April 1990, cat. 3; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

132 ***Boys chasing crabs*** 1990,
gouache, watercolour and pastel on paper, 90.5 x 99.5cm.
Collection: Mr Ian Pollard.
Exhibited: Retrospective 1991–92.

133 ***An old Gardener bidding his flowers farewell*** 1990,
gouache, watercolour and pastel on paper, 95 x 99.5 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '90, inscribed l.r.: title.
Collection: Dr Choong Koon Lai and Mrs EE-Lynn Lai.
Exhibited: Retrospective 1991–92.

134 ***Fish Head and Baptism Spoon*** 1990 (also known as *Fish and Baptism Spoon*),
oil on canvas, 137 x 151.5 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '90.
Collection of the artist.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, 1991, cat. 5; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

FIGURES

1 ***Cartoons***, c. 1943,
watercolour on paper, 42 x 30 cm.
Unsigned, undated.
Private collection.

2 ***Earle Backen*** c. 1947,
pen, ink and wash, pencil, 30 x 27.5 cm.
Signed l.r.: J. Olsen.
Private collection.

3 ***John Passmore*** 1987,
pen and ink on paper, 75.4 x 54 cm.
Signed and dated l.l: John Olsen 87. Lengthy secondary inscription.
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, May 1988; *Australian Drawings 1984-1988,* National Gallery of Australia (University Drill Hall Gallery), Canberra, July–October 1988; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

4 John Passmore, ***Harbourside*** 1952,
oil on hardboard, 61 x 81.5cm.
Signed l.r.: JP.
Collection: National Gallery of Victoria
Purchased 1966.
Exhibited: Landfall, *The Captain James Cook bicentenary exhibition of Australian Art*, National Gallery of Victoria, April-June 1970; *John Passmore Retrospective*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, December 1984 - February 1985, cat.22.

5 Demonstration drawings from John Olsen's 1976 Notebook (based on a series of workshops; collected and arranged by T.J. Woodward in 1978, Campbell Town, Tasmania) recalling his drawing classes with John Passmore at the Julian Ashton Art School.

6 ***Figure*** 1987
enamel on newspaper, 60 x 42 cm.
Signed l.r.: JO, inscribed l.c.: title.
Private collection.
Exhibited: John Olsen – Encounters with Drawing, Wollongong City Gallery, December 1987–January 1988; Australian Galleries, May 1988.

7 ***Man and Dog*** 1987,
enamel on newspaper, 42 x 60 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '87.
Private collection.
Exhibited: John Olsen—Encounters with Drawing, Wollongong City Gallery, December 1987-January 1988; Australian Galleries, May 1988.

8 ***The Sea of Galillee*** 1954,
oil on canvas, 72 x 93 cm.
Private collection.
Exhibited: The Blake Prize, Mark Foys Art Gallery, Sydney, 1954.

9 ***Mary bathing Jane*** 1953,
pastel on paper on board, 19.5 x 21.5 cm.
Signed and dated 1.1: J.O. '53. Private collection.
Provenance: This work, which was completed at the Julian Ashton Art School, has remained in the possession of the current owner since 1953.

10 Marino Marini, ***Horse and Rider***, 1949-50.
bronze sculpture.
The Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, USA.
Illustrated in *A Child's Garden of Sculpture*, text by Elinor Lander Horwitz, photographs by Joshua Horwitz, Washington Books. 1976, unpaginated.

11 ***The Bicycle Boy*** (study) c. 1954–55
ink and wash on paper, 33.5 x 38.7 cm.
Collection: Ray and Annette Hughes.
Provenance: Macquarie Galleries; Rudy Komon.

12 Preliminary sketches for ***The Bicycle Boys*** series c. 1954–55
gouache on paper, measurements inaccessible (framed in irregular mount). Unsigned, undated.
Private collection.
Provenance: The artist.

13 Maria Vieira da Silva, ***City Perspectives*** undated,
oil on canvas, 96.5 x 132cm.
Collection: Colonel Aubrey Gibson.
Signed l.r.: Vieira da Silva.
Provenance: Purchased from the 'French Painting Today' exhibition, 1953.
Illustrated on the front cover of *Art and Australia*, Vol.2, No.3, December 1964.

14 *Pacific Loan Exhibition: Contemporary Australian Art* 1956,
catalogue illustrations of the following works:
Lawrence Daws, *Forces of the City 1*;
John Olsen, *View of the Western World No.2.*

15 John Passmore, ***Chasing Mullet*** 1956,
oil on composition board, 121.8 x 182cm.
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery.
Purchased with the assistance of an Australian Government Grant through the Visual Arts Board 1974.
Exhibited: Direction 1, Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, December 1956; *Joseph Brown autumn exhibition*, Melbourne, March-April 1974; *John Passmore Retrospective*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, December 1984 - February 1985, cat.43.

16 Alfred Manessier, ***The Sleeping Harbour*** 1951,
catalogue of the 'French Painting Today' exhibition 1953.
Illustrated in *Art and Australia*, Vol.24, No.4, Winter 1987, p.501.
Exhibited: Direction 1, Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, December 1956.

17 Robert Klippel, ***Construction*** 1956,
brazed metal, 61cm high.
Private collection, New York.
Illustrated in *Art and Australia* (as above) p.479.
Exhibited: Direction 1, Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, December 1956.

18 William Rose, ***(Direction 1)*** 1956,
oil on hardboard, 80.5 x 120.5cm.
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales.
Illustrated in *Art and Australia* (see cat. fig.16 above) p.499.
Exhibited: Direction 1, Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, December 1956.

19 ***Studies at Hayters*** 1957,
etching (5 states), 19.5 x 15.1 cm. Artist's proofs only.
Collection: Australian Galleries.
Provenance: The artist.

20 Jean Dubuffet, ***Bon Voyage*** 1956
oil on canvas, 60 x 73cm.
Illustrated in *Jean Dubuffet - Two Decades: 1943-1962*, exhibition catalogue,
Donald Morris Gallery, Michigan, USA, pl.30.

21 Karel Appel, ***The Meeting*** 1951,
oil on canvas, 130 x 97.5cm.
Collection: Rijkdienst Beeldende Kunst, The Hague, Netherlands,
on loan to the Centraal Museum, Utrecht.
Illustrated: Willemijn Stokvis, *COBRA*, Rizzoli, New York, 1988, pl.73.

22 Corneille, ***Pierre et Fleurs*** 1955,
oil on canvas, 53 x 76cm.
Collection: Stedelijk Musuem, Schiedam, Netherlands.
Illustrated in Stokvis, *COBRA* (see above) pl.97.

23 ***Wheels within Wheels*** 1959,
oil on canvas, 100 x 119 cm.
Signed and dated l.l: John Olsen 59.
Collection: Mr & Mrs Charles Nodrum.
Exhibited: Recent Australian Painting, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London,
June–July 1961, cat. 75.

24 ***Tres Amigos*** 1960,
gouache on paper, 67 x 47cm.
Collection: Newcastle Region Art Gallery.

25 Colin Lanceley, ***Glad Family Picnic*** 1961,
oil, enamel, and mixed media collage on plywood, 122 x 183cm.
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. Bequest of Lucy Swanton.
Illustrated, *Colin Lanceley*, exhibition catalogue, Craftsman House, Sydney, 1987, pl.3.

26 Peter Upward, ***June Celebration*** 1961,
synthetic polymer paint on compostion board, 113.5 x 411.5cm.
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
Exhibited: *9 Sydney (Nine Sydney Artists)* 1961, David Jones Art Gallery, Sydney.

27 ***Australian Flux*** 1960
charcoal and gouache on paper, 67.3 x 92.7 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '60.
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales.
Gift of Terry Clune and the artist 1960.
Provenance: Completed 23 September 1960 in the artist's studio,
109 Victoria Street, Potts Point.
Exhibited: Terry Clune Gallery, 1960, uncatalogued;
Twentieth Century Australian Watercolours from the Collection, Art Gallery of
New South Wales, April–June 1989, cat. 60; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

28 Sidney Nolan, ***Pretty Polly Mine*** 1948,
ripolin enamel on hardboard, 91 x 122.2cm.
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales.
Purchased 1949
Exhibited: Sidney Nolan: Landscapes & Legends (a retrospective exhibition 1937-1987).
Illustrated in colour in Jane Clark (with an essay by Patrick McCaughey) *Sidney Nolan: Landscapes & Legends (a retrospective exhibition 1937-1987)*, International Cultural Corporation of Australia Ltd., Sydney, 1987, p.103.

29 ***Spring*** 1960,
oil on canvas, 122 x 92 cm.
Signed l.r.: John Olsen, inscribed u.r.: title.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Terry Clune Gallery, October 1960, cat. 6.

30 ***Hill End*** c.1962,
oil on paper (three sheets) on board, 72.7 x 104.5 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '62.
Private collection.
Provenance: Gift of the artist.

31 Sali Herman, ***McElhone Stairs*** 1944,
oil on canvas, 67.3 x 55cm.
Private collection.
Illustrated in colour in Bernard Smith, *Australian Painting 1788-1970*,
Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1978, p.235.

32 ***McElhone Steps*** 1963–64, ed. 50,
lithograph 3 colours on Arches paper, 57.5 x 80 cm (sheet).
Signed and dated l.l: John Olsen '63 ['64], inscribed l.c.: title.
Printed by Janet Dawson, Gallery A, Melbourne.
Provenance: Commissioned by the National Gallery Society of Victoria. First thirty in the edition were printed by December 1963; the remaining twenty were signed in 1964 (letter from James Mollison to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1964).

33 ***The Garden and Me*** 1964,
oil and crayon on paper, 55 x 75 cm.
Signed l.r.: John Olsen, inscribed l.c.: title.
Private collection.
Provenance: Purchased at Gallery A, Melbourne, 1964.
Exhibited: Retrospective 1991–92.

34 ***Bird and Cat*** c. 1963
gouache and oil on paper, 50 x 75.7 cm.
Unsigned, undated.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, 1963; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

35 This doll's house belonged to Louise Olsen
and was decorated by her father in the 1960s.
Recalled during an interview with Louise for this publication.

36 ***Bonnard I*** 1987
ink on paper, 20 x 21 cm.
Signed l.r.: JO, inscribed l.r.: Bonnard 1942.
Private collection.
Exhibited: John Olsen – Encounters with Drawing, Wollongong City Gallery, December 1987–January 1988; Australian Galleries, May 1988.

37 ***The Chapel*** 1966,
synthetic polymer paint on hardboard, 59 x 99.5 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '66.
Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. Gift of Patrick White 1973.
Exhibited: Clune Galleries, May 1967, cat. 3.

38 ***Rainy Paseo*** 1966,
gouache on paper, 76 x 110 cm.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Clune Galleries, July 1967, cat. 12.

39 ***The Fair*** 1966,
charcoal on paper, 50 x 65 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 66.
Collection: Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney.
Exhibited: Clune Galleries, May 1967, uncatalogued.

40 ***Entrance to the Castle of Life*** 1967,
exhibition poster for John Olsen's exhibition,
Clune Galleries, March 1967.

41 ***Albert Tucker*** 1973, ed. 10,
lithograph on Arches paper, 76 x 57 cm.
Signed and dated l.r: John Olsen 73, inscribed l.c.: Albert Tucker; l.l.: [ed].
Published by Rudy Komon Gallery.

42 Fred Williams, ***Silver and grey*** 1969-70,
oil on canvas, 152.5 x 183.5cm.
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
Purchased 1976.
Illustrated in colour in *James Mollison, A Singular Vision: The Art of Fred Williams*,
Australian National Gallery, Canberra, 1989, p.142.

43 John Olsen working on large drawings for *Salute to Five Bells* 1971-73,
the mural for the Sydney Opera House. Original photograph by Robert Walker.

44 Joan Miro, ***The Harlequin's Carnival*** 1924-25,
oil on canvas, 66 x 92.5cm.
Collection: The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York, USA.
Illustrated in colour, H.H. Arnason, *A History of Modern Art: Painting, sculpture and achitecture*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1977, pl.151.

45 ***The Bay and Tidal Pool*** 1977,
oil on marine plyboard, dimensions not available (high installation).
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 77, inscribed l.r.: title.
Private collection.
Provenance: Commissioned for The Master Builders Association, Victoria.

46 ***Pelican Feeding.***
ink and wash on paper
from John Olsen's *Wild Australia* sketchbook.
Private collection.

47 ***Pelicans*** 1978. ed. 40,
lithograph, 76 x 57 cm (sheet).
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 78, inscribed l.c.: Pelicans; l.l.: [ed].
Printed by John Robinson, Druckma Press.

48 ***Spoonbills and Swamp Frogs*** 1979 (*Down Under* series) ed. 50,
colour lithograph, 90 x 63.5 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 79, inscribed l.c. title; l.l.: [ed].
Printed by Fred Genis, published by Port Jackson Press. *Exhibited: Retrospective* 1991–92.

49 ***Banded stilts, Coorong*** 1971-72,
pen and ink drawing, variable dimensions.
John Olsen's *Wild Australia* sketchbook.

50 ***Laughing Frog*** 1976. ed. 90,
sugarlift etching on Arches paper, 94 x 64 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '76, inscribed c: Laughing frog Tao; l.l: [ed].
Printed by Max Miller, published by Port Jackson Press.

51 ***Frog in the Rain*** 1975, ed. 50,
etching on Arches paper, 80 x 70 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 75, inscribed c: Frog in the Rain; l.l.: [ed].
Crossley Print Workshop.

52 ***Tree Frog*** 1973, ed. 25,
lithograph in brown on Arches paper, 76 x 57 cm (sheet).
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 73, inscribed: l.c.: Tree Frog; l.l.: [ed].
Published by Rudy Komon Gallery.
Exhibited: Retrospective 1991–92.

53 ***Birds by the Lake*** 1976,
Chinese ink on paper, 65.6 x 101.4 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '75.
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 1976.
Exhibited: Ray Hughes Gallery, Brisbane, May 1976, cat. 18; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

54 ***Life Drawn Towards the Void*** 1975 (*Edge of the Void* series), ed. 50,
etching and aquatint on Arches paper,
60.2 x 45 cm (comp.), 80 x 60.4 cm (sheet).
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 75, inscribed c.: Life Drawn to the void; l.l.: [ed].
Printed by Max Miller, published by Port Jackson Press.

55 ***Emus by the Lake*** 1975 (*Edge of the Void* series), ed. 50,
etching on Arches paper, 50.2 x 33.2 cm (comp.), 80 x 60.4 cm (sheet).
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 75, inscribed c.: Emus by the Lake; l.l.: [ed]. Printed by Max Miller, published by Port Jackson Press.

56 ***Wild Camels*** 1976 (*Lake Eyre and the Desert Sea* series), ed. 60,
etching, aquatint, 40.3 x 33.2 cm (comp.), 75 x 52.5 cm (sheet).
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 76, inscribed c: Wild Camels; l.l.: [ed].
Printed by Max Miller, published by Port Jackson Press.

57 ***Pelican and Emu Egg*** 1975,
gouache and watercolour on torinoko paper, 192 x 100 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 75. Private collection.
Provenance: Purchased from Australian Galleries 1986.
Exhibited: Retrospective 1991–92.

58 ***Dead Fish*** 1976 (*Lake Eyre and the Desert Sea* series), ed. 60,
etching, aquatint, 27.8 x 40 cm (image), 75.2 x 52.4 cm (sheet).
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 76, inscribed l.c.: Dead Fish; l.l.: [ed].
Secondary inscription: LX Governing a large state is like boiling a small fish – Tao.
Printed by Max Miller, published by Port Jackson Press.

59 ***Night Bird*** 1978 (*Earth Hold* series), ed. 60,
etching, sugarlift and aquatint on Arches paper, 76 x 54 cm (sheet).
Signed and dated c.r.: John Olsen 78, inscribed c.: Night Bird; c.l.: [ed].
Printed by Max Miller, published by Port Jackson Press.

60 ***Jessica's poem*** 1978 (*Earth Hold* series), ed.60,
etching, aquatint on Arches paper, 76 x 54cm.
Signed and dated c.r.: John Olsen 78, inscribed c.: Jessica's poem, c.l.: [ed].
Printed by Max Miller, published by Port Jackson Press.

61 ***Bird and Kangaroo*** 1979 (*Down Under* series), ed. 50,
colour lithograph on Arches paper, 91 x 63 cm (sheet).
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 79, inscribed l.c.: Bird and Kangaroo; l.l.: [ed].
Printed by Fred Genis, published by Port Jackson Press.
Exhibited: Retrospective 1991–92.

62 ***Back O'Bourke*** 1979. (*Down Under* series), ed. 50,
colour lithograph on Arches paper, 91.5 x 63 cm (sheet).
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 79, inscribed l.c.: Back O'Bourke; l.l.: [ed].
Printed by Fred Genis, published by Port Jackson Press.
Exhibited: Retrospective 1991–92.

63 ***Bird and Kangaroo Landscape*** 1979 (*Down Under* series), ed. 50,
colour lithograph on Arches paper, 91 c 63 cm (sheet).
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 79, inscribed l.c.: Bird & Kangaroo Landscape; l.l.: [ed].
Printed by Fred Genis, published by Port Jackson Press.

64 ***Monkey Hanging*** 1981,
ink, wash and pastel on paper, 80 x 59cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 81.
Collection: The Christensen Fund.
Exhibited: Bortignon's Kalamunda Gallery of Man, Festival of Perth, 1982,
cat. 5; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

65 ***Monkey Confused by the 20th Century*** 1981,
ink and pastel on paper, 80 x 59 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '81.
Collection: The Christensen Fund.
Exhibited: Bortignon's Kalamunda Gallery of Man, Festival of Perth, 1982, cat. 3;
Retrospective 1991–92.

66 ***Emus by the Lake*** 1975
charcoal and pastel on paper, 192 x 100 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen '75, inscribed l.r.: Emus by the Lake.
Collection: Australian Galleries.

67 ***Mundoo*** 1987,
gouache on paper, 77 x 56 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: JO 87, inscribed l.r.: Mundoo.
Private collection.
Exhibited: John Olsen – Encounters with Drawing, Wollongong City Gallery,
December–January 1987–88; Australian Galleries, May 1988.

68 ***Man and Dog, Jigalong*** 1982,
gouache and wash on paper, 25.8 x 12.5cm.
Collection: The Christensen Fund.
Exhibited: The Land Beyond Time (extensive tour, see exhibitions listing).

69 ***Aboriginal carrying his brother over Bindieyes*** 1982,
ink, pastel, gouache and wash on paper, 32.3 x 23.5cm.
Collection: The Christensen Fund.
Exhibited: The Land Beyond Time (extensive tour, see exhibitions listing).

70 ***Aboriginal Child Drawing*** 1982,
gouache and pastel on paper, 55.3 x 37.5 cm.
Collection: The Christensen Fund.
Exhibited: The Land Beyond Time (extensive tour, see exhibitions listing).

71 ***Paella*** 1980,
ink, wash and watercolour on paper, 98 x 116 cm.
Signed l.r.: John Olsen. Private collection.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, October–November 1980, cat 16; Heide Park Art Gallery, August–September 1968, cat. 17.

72 ***Landscape Wounded by Summer*** 1986,
oil on canvas, 184.5 x 244.5cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 87
Private collection.
Exhibited: Heide Park and Art Gallery, Melbourne, August–September 1986, cat.25.

73 ***Malloy and Moran*** 1986,
ink and wash on paper, 52 x 79 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 86.
Private collection.
Exhibited: Australian Galleries, September–October 1986, cat. 29.

74 Goya, ***The Dog*** c.1820-23,
oil on gesso, 134 x 80cm.
Collection: The Prado, Madrid.
Illustrated, Xavier de Salas, *Goya*, English ed., published by Bay Books Pty. Ltd. 1979, p.147.

75 ***Hanging on the Edge*** 1987,
watercolour, ink and crayon on paper, 189 x 99 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: John Olsen '87. Private collection.
Exhibited: John Olsen – Encounters with Drawing, Wollongong City Gallery, December 1987–January 1988; Australian Galleries 1988.

76 ***Degas in old age I*** 1986,
charcoal and pastel on paper, 47 x 40 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen, inscribed l.c.: Degas in old age.
Private collection.
Exhibited: John Olsen – Encounters with Drawing, Wollongong City Gallery, December 1987–January 1988; Australian Galleries 1988; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

77 ***Degas in old age II*** 1986,
charcoal and pastel, 80.3 x 51.3 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 86, inscribed l.c.: Degas in Old Age.
Collection: Geelong Art Gallery. Gift of Arthur Boyd in memory of his father Merric Boyd, 1988.
Exhibited: John Olsen – Encounters with Drawing, Wollongong City Gallery, December 1987–January 1988; Australian Galleries 1988; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

78 ***Degas – the last years*** 1986
ink and wash on paper, 76 x 57 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 86. Other inscription: reprinted under image. Private collection.
Exhibited: John Olsen – Encounters with Drawing, Wollongong City Gallery, December 1987–January 1988; Australian Galleries 1988; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

79 ***Renoir I*** 1986,
ink and wash on paper, 76 x 53 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 86. Other inscription: reprinted under image.
Private collection. *Exhibited: John Olsen – Encounters with Drawing*, Wollongong City Gallery, December 1987–January 1988; Australian Galleries 1988; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

80 ***Bonnard II*** 1986,
ink and gouache on paper, 60 x 45 cm.
Signed and dated l.l: John Olsen 86. Other inscription: reprinted under image.
Private collection.
Exhibited: John Olsen – Encounters with Drawing, Wollongong City Gallery, December 1987–January 1988; Australian Galleries 1988; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

81 ***Giacometti I*** 1987,
ink and wash on paper, 44 x 53 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 1987, inscribed l.c.: Giacometti.
Private collection.
Exhibited: John Olsen – Encounters with Drawing, Wollongong City Gallery, December 1987–January 1988; Australian Galleries 1988.

82 ***De Kooning*** 1987
ink on paper, 77 x 40 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: JO 87, inscribed l.r.: de Kooning.
Other inscription: reprinted under image.
Collection of the artist.
Exhibited: John Olsen – Encounters with Drawing, Wollongong City Gallery, December 1987–January 1988; Australian Galleries 1988; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

83 ***Mark Rothko*** 1987,
ink and wash on paper, 63 x 70 cm.
Signed and dated l.l.: John Olsen 87. Other inscription: reprinted under image.
Private collection.
Exhibited: John Olsen – Encounters with Drawing, Wollongong City Gallery, December 1987–January 1988; Australian Galleries, May 1988.

84 ***Ian Fairweather*** 1987,
ink and wash on paper, 76 x 56 cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 87. Other inscription: reprinted under image.
Private collection.
Exhibited: John Olsen – Encounters with Drawing, Wollongong City Gallery, December 1987–January 1988; Australian Galleries 1988; *Retrospective* 1991–92.

85 ***Lloyd Rees*** 1986,
ink and wash on paper, 76 x 57cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 86. Other inscription reprinted under image.
Private collection.
Exhibited: John Olsen – Encounters with Drawing, Wollongong City Gallery, December 1987–January 1988; Australian Galleries 1988.

86 ***Beckett joins the Gypsy Caravan*** 1990,
watercolour, gouache, pastel on paper, 99 x 94cm.
Signed and dated l.r.: John Olsen 90, inscribed l.l: Beckett Joins the Gypsy Caravan.
Collection: Mr and Mrs Saxon.
Provenance: The artist. *Exhibited: Retrospective* 1991–92.

87 Diego Velasquez, ***An Old Woman Cooking Eggs*** 1618,
oil on canvas, 99 x 117cm.
Collection: National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

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Body and Soul, includes preface by Elwyn Lynn, curated by Merryn Gates and Jenepher Duncan. Monash University Gallery, Monash University, Melbourne, 1988.

Hart, Deborah. *John Olsen – Encounters with Drawing*. Australian Galleries, Melbourne, 1988.

THESIS

Dungavell, Ian. *John Olsen: The 'You Beaut' Years, Paintings 1960–1964*, BA Honours Thesis, July 1989, Australian National University, Canberra.

INTERVIEWS

de Berg, Hazel. *Transcrips of interviews with John Olsen*, 1962 and 1964, Australian National Library, Canberra.

Gleeson, James. *Taped interview with John Olsen*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, 9 April 1979.

Interviews with the author: November 1989–February 1991

Numerous interviews were conducted with John Olsen for this publication.

In addition, the following interviews are gratefully acknowledged:

Earle Backen, Roy Churcher, Cresside Collette, Pamela Collins, Thelma Clune, Fred Egan, Andrew Fergusson, Gwen Frolich, Virginia Glover (Coventry), Noela Hjorth, Robert Klippel, Jolly Koh, Colin Lanceley, Elsie Liaubon, Robert Mair, Andrea May, Frank McDonald, Mary McNish, Mirka Mora, Esma Olsen, Valerie Olsen, Louise Olsen, Timothy Olsen, Katharine Olsen, Annette Olszanski, Peter Powditch, Clifton Pugh, Anne Purves, Stuart Purves, William Rose, Robert and Angela Raymond, Tom Sanders, Peter Skrzynecki, Barry Stern, Ann Thomson, Ken Taylor, Margaret Taylor and Daniel Thomas.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

NOTE: The exhibitions listed below relate to John Olsen's major solo shows. For references to group exhibitions see Selected Exhibition Catalogues in the Bibliography.

1955 SYDNEY

Macquarie Galleries (16– 28 February). *John Olsen.*

(The exhibition space was shared with Eugene Barany).

This was Olsen's first major exhibition.

1958 SYDNEY

Macquarie Galleries (6–18 August).

John Olsen. Exhibition of works sent back from Spain 1957–58.

1960 PARIS

Galerie Lambert (3–21 May).

Olsen. Exhibition of works painted during Olsen's stay in Europe;

the majority were dated 1959.

1960 SYDNEY

Terry Clune Gallery (6–15 October).

John Olsen. Oils, drawings and gouaches.

1963 SYDNEY

Clune Galleries (6 March, opening).

An Exhibition of Recent Paintings Gouaches & Drawings by John Olsen.

1963 MELBOURNE

Australian Galleries (25 October–8 November).

John Olsen: Recent Paintings.

Oils gouaches and drawings.

1965 SYDNEY

Clune Galleries (22 April, opening).

John Olsen.

In addition to oil paintings and drawings this exhibition included Olsen's first tapestry,

Joie de Vivre, woven at the Portalegre Tapestry, Portugal, and two ceiling paintings.

1965 MELBOURNE

South Yarra Gallery (15 June, opening).

John Olsen.

Oils, drawings, tapestry and ceiling paintings.

1967 SYDNEY

Clune Galleries (9 May, opening).

Entrance to the Castle of Life: John Olsen 66–67.

Oils, drawings and tapestries; the majority completed during Olsen's stay in Castelo de Vide, Portugal, 1966.

1967 MELBOURNE

South Yarra Gallery (25 July–11 August).

Entrance to the Castle of Life: John Olsen 66–67.

Oils, drawings and tapestries, the majority completed during Olsen's stay in Castelo de Vide, Portugal, 1966.

1969 SYDNEY

Rudy Komon Gallery (April).

The Donemoochin [sic] Summer: John Olsen '69.

Tapestry, oils, gouaches and drawings, tapestry woven by Bruce Arthur and Deanna Conti – Brudea Studio, Timana Island.

1969 ADELAIDE

White Studio (9 November, opening).

John Olsen '69 – Exhibition of Gouaches and Oil Paintings.

1970 BRISBANE

Reid Gallery (14 November–10 December).

John Olsen.

Oils and gouaches; exhibition courtesy of Rudy Komon Gallery.

1971 SYDNEY

Rudy Komon Gallery (10 November– 1 December)

John Olsen. Tapestries (woven by Brudea Studio), oils, ceramics by Olsen and Robert Mair, photographs of *Eastern World* ceramic mural by Olsen and Tom Sanders.

1972 MELBOURNE

Australian Galleries (24 October–8 November).

John Olsen. Oils and gouaches; the majority completed

at Dunmoochin, Cottlesbridge, Victoria and three Hill End works, 1960.

1973 SYDNEY

Rudy Komon Gallery (20 October–7 November).

John Olsen. Paintings, tapestries (woven by Brudea Studio), oils,

drawings and lithographs. The majority of the oils related to Olsen's

work on the *Salute to Five Bells* mural for the Sydney Opera House.

1974 ADELAIDE

Atelier 72 Gallery (11–30 March).

John Olsen. Oils and gouaches;

exhibition courtesy of Rudy Komon Galleries.

1975 SYDNEY

Rudy Komon Gallery (31 May–25 June).

John Olsen: Edge of the Void.

Drawings, watercolours, etchings and lithographs.

1975 MELBOURNE

Australian Galleries (26 August–9 September).

John Olsen 74–75: Edge of the Void and Opera House Mural studies.

Oils, drawings, watercolours, etchings and lithographs.

1975 ADELAIDE

Greenhill Galleries (27 November, opening).

Edge of the Void: Paintings drawings Etchings and Lithographs by John Olsen.

1975 CANBERRA

Gallery Huntly (13-22 November).

John Olsen: Etchings.

1976 BRISBANE

Ray Hughes Gallery (8–28 May).

John Olsen: Recent oil paints, gouaches, drawings and etchings.

1976 BRISBANE

St John's Anglican Cathedral (30 April–24 March).

The Child in us All.

Paintings and tapestries by John Olsen; kite installations by Peter Travis.

Survey of Olsen's works 1960–76. Organised by the Very Reverend Ian George,

presented in association with Queensland Festival of the Arts Society,

with the assistance of the Queensland Art Gallery Society.

1977 MELBOURNE

Australian Galleries (2–16 August).

John Olsen: Recent Paintings. Oils, gouaches and prints.

1978 SYDNEY

Berry Stern Galleries (11-29 April).

John Olsen: Paintings and Drawings 77-78.

1979 BRISBANE

Cintra House (18 October, opening).

John Olsen: Earth Hold etchings.

Etchings by John Olsen based on poems by Jennifer Rankin.

1980 MELBOURNE

Australian Galleries (27 October–8 November).

John Olsen: exhibition of recent paintings.

1980 PERTH

Lister Gallery (March).

John Olsen: Paintings and drawings 77–80.

Festival of Perth, 1980.

1980 SYDNEY

David Reid Gallery (November).

John Olsen: My Complete Graphics.

1981 SYDNEY

Barry Stern Galleries, Sydney (20–27 October).

John Olsen: A Sliver of Time.

Drawings and watercolours which appeared in the publication

A Sliver of Time by Ivan Smith.

1982 PERTH

Bortignon's Kalamunda Gallery of Man (5 February–6 March).

John Olsen 81–82 and Noela Hjorth.

Festival of Perth, 1982

1982 MELBOURNE

Australian Galleries (19 July–31 July).

John Olsen. Oils, drawings, ceramics, prints.

1983 PERTH

Art Gallery of Western Australia (20 April– 29 May 1983).

John Olsen: Selected Graphics.

This exhibition included 111 prints.

1983 PERTH

Art Gallery of West Australia (May).

John Olsen – The Land Beyond Time.

Works from the Christensen Fund Collection.

The paintings and drawings in this collection travelled extensively around Australia.

The venues and dates (courtesy of The Christensen Fund) after Perth were as follows:

1984/85 BRISBANE	Queensland Art Gallery (21 November 1984– 6 January)
1985 NEWCASTLE	Newcastle Region Art Gallery (8–29 September)
1985 WOLLONGONG	Wollongong City Gallery (1 November–8 December)
1986 TOWNSVILLE	Perc Tucker Regional Gallery (3 January–9 March)
1986 TAMWORTH	Tamworth City Gallery (April–May)
1986 ORANGE	Orange Regional Gallery (1 June–7 July)
1986 PENRITH	The Lewers Bequest and Penrith Regional Art Gallery (July–September)
1986 WAGGA WAGGA	Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery (October)
1986 MELBOURNE	Westpac Gallery, Victorian Arts Centre (November)
1986 ALICE SPRINGS	The Araluen Arts Centre (December)
1986/87 SHEPPARTON	Shepparton Art Gallery (December–January)
1989 SYDNEY	Manly Art Gallery (7 September– 15 October)
1989 CANBERRA	Nolan Gallery, Lanyon (February–31 March)
1990 ADELAIDE	Kensington Gallery, Adelaide Festival (4–25 February) (works on paper). North Adelaide School of Arts (March) (paintings)

1984 ADELAIDE

Tynte Gallery (10 March–8 April).

John Olsen.

Oils, ceramics, works on paper and ceiling painting.

Adelaide Festival 1984.

1985 ADELAIDE

Tynte Gallery (26 October–19 November).

John Olsen. Oils, mixed media works on paper and ceramics.

1986 DARWIN

Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory (23 May–8 June).

Paintings and Drawings by John Olsen from the permanent collection.

1986 MELBOURNE

Heide Park and Art Gallery (5 August–14 September).

John Olsen – In Search of the Open Country 1961–1986.

Survey exhibition curated by the director, Maudie Palmer.

1986 SYDNEY

Art Gallery of New South Wales (October).

John Olsen: 'Gold'. Oils and works on paper.

1986 MELBOURNE

Australian Galleries (17 September–7 October).

John Olsen. Oils, gouaches and mixed media works.

1987/1988 WOLLONGONG

Wollongong City Gallery (18 December–27 January 1988).

John Olsen – Encounters with Drawing.

Works on paper from 1960 to 1987.

1988 MELBOURNE

Australian Galleries (3–25 May).

John Olsen – Encounters with Drawing.

Works on paper from 1960 to 1987.

1989 PERTH

Greenhill Gallery (24 October–9 November).

John Olsen. Works on paper.

1990 SYDNEY

Australian Galleries (2–28 April).

John Olsen.

Oils, watercolour and gouache works on paper

as well as hand-coloured lithographs.

1991 MELBOURNE

Australian Galleries (5–23 March).

John Olsen.

Oils, works on paper and etchings.

1991/92 MELBOURNE

National Gallery of Victoria (1 November–2 February).

John Olsen Retrospective.

This major retrospective included 103 works in all media,

ranging from 1955 to 1990.

1992 SYDNEY

Art Gallery of New South Wales (8 May - 28 June)

John Olsen Retrospective.

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